

THE
CANADIAN
MAGAZINE



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Title: The Woods in Summer

Date of first publication: 1911

Author: L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery (1874-1942)

Date first posted: Mar. 28, 2017

Date last updated: Mar. 28, 2017

Faded Page eBook #20170350

This ebook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Woods in Summer

L. M. Montgomery

First published *The Canadian Magazine*, 1911.

The spring woods are all spiritual. They charm us through the senses of eye and ear—delicate tintings and aerial sounds, like a maiden's dreams set to music. But the summer woods make a more sensuous appeal. They know that they have lost the freshness of their first youth, that something is gone for which all their luscious shadows and mellow lightings can never quite atone. So they offer us delectable things to tickle our palates. Who that has eaten strawberries, grass-new, from the sunny corners of summer woods, can ever forget them?

Strawberries are very delicious, even when eaten with cream and sugar, among the haunts of men. But would you know the real flavour of the strawberry in its highest perfection? Then come with me to a certain sunlit dell, along which white birches grow on one side and on the other the still, changeless ranks of the spruces. There are long grasses here at the roots of the trees, combed down by the winds, and wet with morning dew, long into the afternoon. Here we shall find berries, fit for the gods on high Olympus, great ambrosial sweetnesses, hanging like rubies to long, rosy stalks. Lift them by the stalk and eat them from it while they are uncrushed and virgin, tasting each berry by itself, with all its wild fragrance ensphered within. If you try to carry it home that elusive essence escapes, and then it is nothing more than a common berry of the fields and sunshine, very kitchenly good, indeed, but not as it should be when gathered and eaten in its uncharted haunts until our fingers are stained as pink as Aurora's eyelids.

There are blueberries, too, growing on the sandy hill where we gathered May flowers in the spring. The blueberries are not sung in song or enshrined in romance; but I do not see why they should not be, for they are beautiful to behold; and, if eaten in their native haunts, are delicious enough as well, although, of course, not to be mentioned in the same paragraph as the strawberries. Perhaps it is because they are somewhat too lavish of themselves, in their great, heavily-hanging, plainly-seen clusters. They lack the charm of comparative rarity and exclusiveness; they need not to be eaten one by one, like the strawberries, but may be crunched together in generous mouthfuls. See how pretty they are—the dainty green of the unripe berries, the glossy pinks and scarlets of the half-ripe, the misty blue of the fully matured. To sit on this hill, steeped in languid summer sunshine, rife with odours of fir and of nameless growing things in their golden prime, with the sigh of winds in the shaking tree-tops, and eat blueberries, is something that the mighty ones of earth might envy us. The poor inhabitants of palaces, how we can pity them, from this, our hill throne of the wilderness, fronting the gateways of the west! The afternoon is a great, dulcet, golden dream of peace, through which the heart of summer throbs with lazy rhythm.

Pigeon-berries are not to be eaten. They are woolly, tasteless things. But they

were created to be looked at and they have the beauty that is its own excuse for being. They grow in the places of shadow, preferably the fibrous banks under the boughs of the spruces, knowing, perhaps, how the green and the gloom set off their glowing scarlet. Such scarlet! They, too, are true children of the wood, in that they lose their beauty elsewhere. Dare to take them home with you, and they seem hard, flaunting, obvious things, void of all charm. But in the spruce wood they are vivid and brilliant, the jewels with which the sombre forest of cone-bearers loves to deck its brown breast.

The woods are full of summer flowers, and rich spoil may be ours for the seeking; but it is a pity to gather wood flowers. They do not bear it well, not even so well as the strawberries. They lose half their witchery away from the shadow and the green and the flicker. The gay ones look too gay and crude when unsoftened by the backgrounds of the ancient wood; and the little, shy, sweet things seem lost and timid and homesick. No, we shall not pluck the wood flowers. The way to enjoy them most is to track them down to their remote haunts, gloat over them there, and then leave them, with backward glances, taking with us only the beguiling memory of their grace and fragrance.

In late June and early July the spruce woods are given over to the June-bells, which have another and more scientific name, of course. But who wants a better name than June-bells? They are so perfect in their way that they seem to epitomise the very secret and charm of the forest, as if the old wood's daintiest thoughts had materialised in blossom, and all the roses by Bendameer's stream are not so fragrant as a shallow sheet of June-bells under the boughs of fir.

Starflowers grow here, too, spirit pale and fair; and ladies' lips are found in abundance by those who know just where to look for them, but never reveal themselves to the casual passer-by. They are not, as their name might suggest, red, but creamy tinted. Perhaps it is their surpassing sweetness which accounts for the name. Their perfume is richer than that of the June-bells and every whit as haunting and mystical.

In July the waste places of the wood, which axe has scarred and flame scorched, are aglow with the purple pomp of the fireweed, which depends, and not vainly, on its colouring alone for its beauty. The fire that defaced and blackened must have awakened some answering glow and fervour in the veins of the wood, which has outbroken in this wave of royal magnificence, surging against the pine hill and overflowing the brushwood to our very feet.

The ladies' eardrops are twinkling jewel-like from hanging boughs on all the brooklands; and along the lanes and among the birches the buttercups are smiling at

us, quite as much at home here as on the breezy uplands.

In August the goldenrod makes glad the sunny woodways, and the asters shake out their frilled lavender gowns. The country people have such a pretty name for them; they call them “farewell-summers,” because they come when summer is beginning to walk westering. She is with us still, but her face is turned from us.

Look, I pray you, at the tints on the trunk of that birch tree before us, whence some vandal hand has torn away the white-skin wrapper in several places. They range from the purest creamy white through exquisite golden tones, growing deeper and deeper until the inmost layer reveals the ripest, richest brown, as if to tell us that all these birches, so maiden-like and cool exteriorly, have yet warmly hued feelings at their hearts.

It is so easy to love your neighbours when your neighbours are all trees; and it is so easy to live with trees. They are the most friendly things in God’s good creation. To hold converse with pines, to whisper secrets with mountain ashes, to listen to the tales of old romance that beeches have to tell, to walk in eloquent silence with self-contained firs is to learn what real companionship is. And then, too, trees, unlike so many humans, always improve on acquaintance. No matter how much you like them at the start you are sure to like them much better further on, and best of all when you have known them for years and enjoyed intercourse with them in all seasons, staunch, loyal friends that they are.

Trees have as much individuality as human beings to those who love and learn them. Not even two spruces are alike. There is some kink or curve, or bend of bough to single each one out from its fellows. Some trees love to grow sociably together, branches intertwining, like girls with their arms about each other, whispering interminably of their secrets. There are more exclusive groups of four or five, and there are hermits of trees who like to stand apart in solitary majesty and hold commune only with the winds of heaven. Yet these trees are often the best worth knowing, and have all the charm that attaches to the strong and lonely and reserved. It is more of a triumph to win their confidence than that of easier trees.

Pines are the trees of myth and legend. They strike their roots deep into the traditions of an older world, but wind and star love their lofty tops. What music when old Aeolus draws his bow across the branches of a pine! What a sense of two majesties meeting when a pearl white planet seems resting on its very crest! Have you ever witnessed a thunderstorm in a pine wood, especially when evening is drawing on? I have, once. And since then I think I have known what God’s voice must have been speaking to Job out of the whirlwind.

We are not going to have a thunderstorm on our walk of this evening, but I verily

believe a shower of rain is coming up. Have you noticed the veiled hush that has fallen over the woods lately, while we have been wandering from tree to tree? All the young breezes that were whispering and rustling so importantly a while ago have folded their wings and are motionless and soundless. Not a leaf rustles, not a shadow flickers. The maple leaves yonder turn wrong side out, until the tree looks as if it were growing pale from fear. And now a cool shade falls over the woods; the cloud has reached us; it is not a big cloud; there is crystalline, untroubled sky below and above it. 'Twill be but a passing shower, and the thick boughs of this fir copse are all the protection that we shall need. Creep under and sit at ease, on the dusky soil, compact of many dead and gone generations of fir needles, which no passing shower can moisten.

Ha, there is the rain now, with a rush and sweep of wind, really more noise than anything else! Yet the shower is a good, smart one while it lasts. It patters down sharply on the maples and dimples the faces of the wood pools. It dances along the lanes and byways and pelts the brook right merrily. It makes quite a fuss for the time being, this impertinent, important shower. But not a drop touches us through our staunch fir, and presently it is all over. The cloud is away and the low sun is shining out on the wet, glistening trees. Far away we see a hill still dim with rain, but below us the cup of the valley seems brimming over with peach-tinted mists. The woods are all pranked out with the sparkle and glitter of jewels, and a bird begins to sing overhead as if he were cheated into believing it is springtime again, so wondrously fresh and sweet is the world all at once.

The rain is a marvellous alchemist. It has extracted the aroma from tree and shrub and blossom, and flung it lavishly on the cool, moist air. It has taken from the firs the tang of their balsam, from the lanes the warm breath of the asters and grasses, from the blueberry hill its savour of ripening fruit, and the wind comes down from the wild places spiced and poignant with the breath of drenched and tangled fern.

A bird comes tiptoeing along the lane, with a worm in her mouth. After a shower is the blessed time for birds. It is a robin, a plump, reddish-breasted thing, that is not even afraid of us. I know her nest is near by, for I found it last week, half-built. Let us look to see if any eggs are in it. Ha, Madam Robin, this disturbs your complacency somewhat, does it? Even the worm is dropped and forgotten, and you fly to a bough above us, chirping frantically. Dear, we are not going to hurt your little home, nor yet this most wonderful egg in it, though we touch it with reverent fingers.

Think what is penned within those fragile, pale-blue walls . . . not, perhaps, "the music of the moon," but an earthlier, homelier music, compact of wholesome

sweetness and the joy of living. This egg will some day be a robin, to whistle us blithely home in the afterlights.

It is afterlight now, for the sun has set. Out in the open there is still much light of a fine, emerald-golden sort. But the wood is already wrapping itself in a dim, blue twilight and falling upon rest in bosk and dell. It will be quite dark before we reach the end of this long, wetly-fragrant lane. There goes the first firefly, or is it a pixy out with a lantern? Soon there are hundreds of them, flashing mysteriously across the dusk, under the boughs and over the ferns. There is certainly something a little supernatural about fireflies. Nobody pretends to understand them. Did anyone ever see a firefly in daylight? They are akin to the tribes of faery, survivals of the olden time, when the woods and hills swarmed with the little green folk. It is still very easy to believe in fairies when you see those goblin lanterns glimmering among the fir tassels.

The full moon has been up for some time, and now, as we come out to the clearing, she is gleaming lustroously from a cloudless sky across the valley. But between us and her stretches up a tall, tall pine, far above the undergrowth, wondrously straight and slender and branchless to its very top, where it overflows in a crest of dark boughs against the silvery splendour behind it. Beyond, the uplands and the homesteads are lying in a suave, white radiance, but here the spell of the woods is still on us, and the white magic of the moonlight behind the pine speaks the last word of the potent incantation.



TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

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