

AUTUMN

by Arthur Ransome

I told you that we are sad when we know that Summer is passing away; but that is only because we love the Summer, with her gay flowers and fair green clothes, and not because we do not like the Autumn. The Imp and the Elf laugh at me when I tell them that all Ogres and Ogresses, all people who are grown up and can never be Imps and Elves again, love the Autumn and the Spring even better than the Summer herself. And then, to make them understand, I tell them a fairy story, how, once upon a time, Spring and Summer and Winter and Autumn were four beautiful little girls. Winter wore a white frock with red berries in her hair; Summer was dressed in deep green, with a crown of hawthorn and blue hyacinths; and Spring had a dress of vivid green, the colour of the larches in the woods, and a beautiful wreath of primroses and violets on her head; while Autumn was only allowed Summer's old dresses when they were faded and nearly worn out Autumn was very unhappy, for she loved pretty dresses like every little girl. But she went about bravely, with a smiling brown face, and never said anything about it. And then one day a fairy Godmother, just like Cinderella's, came into the garden, and asked to see all her little Godchildren. And Spring and Summer and Winter all put on their best frocks and came to be kissed by her. But poor Autumn could only tidy up Summer's old dress, which she did as well as she could, and then came out after the others. But she was shy because she knew that her dress was only an old faded one, and not so pretty as the spick and span clothes of her sisters. So she hung back and was kissed last of all. The Godmother kissed the others on the forehead, but when she came to Autumn she saw that all was not quite well, and looked at her very tenderly and said, "Tell me all about it," just as all the nicest fairy Godmothers do. And Autumn whispered that she was sorry that she was not looking as pretty as the others, but that she really could not help it, because she had no frocks of her own.

The Godmother laughed, and took her in her arms and kissed her on the lips. And then the Godmother put her arm round Autumn's neck, and, walking hand in hand, they went together down the garden under the bending trees to the edge of the pond. "Look into the water, my dear," said the Godmother, and Autumn looked and knew that a magic had been done, for her old faded dress was red and gold, and a rich gold crown lay on her dark hair. And she turned to thank the Godmother, and found that she had gone. She only heard a little laugh in the air, and then she laughed, too, and went away singing happily over the green grass. She has been happy ever since.

And really that is a true tale, and it happens once every year. You can see it happening for yourself after the end of the Summer, just as the Imp and the Elf and I watch it in the fields and woods. First you will see that Autumn is wearing Summer's old clothes, getting shabbier and shabbier and shabbier, and then the fairy Godmother comes, and you see the dusty green grow dim and dark, and then blaze in scarlet and orange, and even before this you will have seen the green corn pale and turn to deepening gold. And when these things have happened you can be very happy, for you will know that Autumn is smiling happily to herself, for she has her own dress at last.

The cutting of the golden corn is almost as jolly as the haymaking, so think the Imp and the Elf. Not quite so jolly, but very nearly. As soon as the hay is cut and tossed and dried and carted away to the stacks we begin watching the corn turn yellower and yellower while its golden grains hang heavily down. And at last, when the fields are bright gold in the sun, and the sky promises us clear weather for a day or two, the scarlet machine comes out again, and Susan has more work to do. This time it is not the hay, but the tall corn that falls swishing (with a noise just like that) behind the machine. And men go behind and bind it into corn-sheaves, great big bundles of corn, and then the corn-sheaves are piled into corn shocks. Eight sheaves stand on end in two rows of four leaning on each other. In some parts

of the country they only have three in each row. As soon as the shocks are made the Imp has some delightful games. He loves to lie flat on the stubbly ground, and wriggle his way into the tunnel between the sheaves of corn until he crawls out at the other end covered with little bits of straw and prickling all over. The Elf does not like this part of it quite so much, but she does it sometimes, and once, when I was littler, I used to do it, too. But that was a very long time ago.

The girls from the farm come into the field to pick up all the stray corn that the men have dropped in making and carrying the sheaves, so that none is wasted at all. That is called gleaning. A long time ago rich farmers used to let poor women come into their fields and keep all the corn that they could glean, all that the reapers had left. In those days, instead of one man sitting on a scarlet reaping machine, they had many reapers, who took the corn in bundles in their arms and cut it off close to the ground with a curved knife called a sickle. This used to be done everywhere till the machines came, and even now there is a little farm we know over the hills where they use the sickle still.

Autumn is the gathering-in time of all the year. In Spring the farmers sow their corn. It grows all the Summer and in Autumn is harvested. In Autumn we gather the garden fruit. In Autumn we pick blackberries, and is not that the finest fun of all the year?

We go blackberrying with deep baskets, and parcels of sandwiches and cakes. We have several good blackberry walks. One of them takes us past the hawthorn tree and along the edge of the moors, and then down into a valley through a long lane with high banks covered with bram-bles and black with the squashy berries. As we pass the hawthorn tree the Elf always look up at it, and though she says nothing I know she is thinking of the Mayday and the dancing and the playing at Oranges and Lemons.

We have a basket each when we go blackberrying, and we race to see who can pick most blackberries. It is a curious thing that the Elf always wins, though the Imp and I work just as hard. Partly I think it is because little girls' fingers are so nimble. Perhaps from making doll's clothes. What do you think? You see just grabbing blackberries is no use at all. We have to pull them carefully from their places, so as to get the berries and nothing else; just the soft black lumps that drop with such nice little plops into the baskets, and go squish in the mouth with such a pleasant taste. Oh, yes, pleasant taste, that reminds me of another reason why when we get home we always find the Elf's basket more full of blackberries than the Imp's. The Imp is like me, and eats nearly as many as he picks. Blackberries are easier to carry that way.

Away behind the house there is an orchard, where there are pears and damsons and apples and quinces, all the very nicest English fruits. And all along the high wall of the orchard on the garden side grow plums, broad trees flat against the wall fastened up to it by little pieces of black stuff with a nail on each side of the boughs.

When the Autumn comes the Imp and the Elf slip sliily round the garden path to the plum trees and pinch the beautiful purple and golden plums and the round greengages to see if they are soft. For as soon as they are soft they are ripe, and as soon as they are ripe comes picking time. And then the old gardener comes with big flat baskets and picks the plums, taking care not to bruise them. And the Imp and the Elf help as much as he allows them and he gives them plums for wages. And then they come to my study with mouths sticky and juicy with ripe plum bringing a plum or perhaps a couple of greengages for me. "For Ogres like plums even if they are busy," says the Elf, as she sits on my knee and crams half a plum and several sticky fingers into my mouth.

Then come the joyous days of apple-gathering and damson picking. When we sit on the orchard wall eating the cake that the cook sends out to us for lunch in the morning we wonder and wonder when the

damsons will be ready. Long ago they have turned from green to violet, and now are deep purple. And the Imp wriggles down from the wall and climbs up the easiest of the trees and shouts out that they are quite soft. And at last the tremendous day comes when the gardener, and the gardener's boy, and the cook, and the kitchenmaid, and the housemaid all troop into the orchard with ladders and baskets. And the gardener climbs a ladder into the highest apple tree and drops the red round apples into the hands of the maids below. The Imp and the Elf seize the step-ladder from the scullery and climb up into a beautiful little apple tree that has a broad low branch that is heavy with rosy-cheeked apples. They wriggle out along the branch and eat some of the apples and drop the rest into the basket on the ground beneath them. And other people pluck the damsons from the damson trees and soon the baskets are full of crimson apples and purple damsons, and away they go into the house where the cook takes a good lot of them to make into a huge damson and apple tart that we shall eat to-morrow.

The old gardener then takes the longest of all the ladders and props it up against the quince tree, for the quince is the highest of all the trees in the orchard. One of the maids climbs half-way up below the gardener and he gathers the green and golden quinces and passes them to her and she passes them to the kitchenmaid, who stands ready on the ground to put them into the basket. And the Imp and the Elf sit in their apple tree and eat apples and laugh and then pretend that they are two wise little owls and call tuwhit tuwhoo, tuwhit tuwhoo, till I take up a walking-stick and pretend to shoot them, and then they throw apples at me and we have a game of catch with the great round red-cheeked balls. Oh, it is a jolly time, the apple-gathering, as the Imp and the Elf would tell you.

About now the fairy Godmother works her miracle for Autumn. We look up to the moors and find them no longer dark and dull for the green brackens have been turned a gorgeous orange by the early frosts in the night-times. And when we look over the farm land to the woods we find the trees no longer green, and the Elf says, "Do you see Ogre, the Godmother has crowned Autumn now?" and sure enough, for the leaves are turned like the brackens into a glory of splendid colours. And then we go and picnic in the golden woods, and sometimes when the sun is hot we could almost fancy it was summer if it were not for the colour. We picnic under the trees and do our best to get a sight of a squirrel, and watch the leaves blowing down from the trees like ruddy golden rain. Once, before we went to the woods, I asked the Imp and the Elf which leaves fall first, the leaves on the topmost branches of the trees or the leaves on the low boughs, The Imp said the top ones, the Elf said the low, and the Elf was right, although I do not think that either of them really knew. Usually the Imp is right, and when I said the low leaves fell the first, he said, "But isn't the wind stronger up above, and don't the high leaves get blown hardest?" Yes, one would think that the high leaves would be the first to drop. Can you guess why they are not? Shall I tell you? Well, you just remember in Spring how the first buds to open were the low ones. Then you will see why they are the first to fall. They are the oldest. When we came to the woods we found that this was just what was happening. All the leaves at the bottom fall, and sometimes many of the trees in the woods kept little plumes of leaves on their topmost twigs after all the others had gone fluttering down the wind.

I am only going to remind you of three more things that belong to Autumn. And one of them is pretty, and one of them is exciting, and one of them is a little sad.

The first is a garden happening. Close under the house we have a broad bed, and for some time before the real Autumn it is full of a very tall plant with lots and lots of narrow dark green leaves. And after a little it is covered with buds, rather like daisy buds only bigger. And then one day the Imp leans out of the window and gives a sudden wriggle. "Come and hold on to my legs, Ogre, but you must not look." And I hold on to his round fat legs and keep my eyes the other way. And he leans farther and farther out of the window, puffing and panting for breath, until he can reach what he wants. And then the fat legs kick backwards, and I pull him in, and when he is quite in he says, "The first," and there in his hand is a beautiful flower like a purple daisy with a golden middle to it. And sure enough it is the first

Michaelmas daisy. That is the really most autumnal of all flowers, just as the primrose is the most special flower of Spring.

The second of the three happenings belongs to the moorland. Up on the high moors, where there is a broad flat place with a little marshy pond in it, the Elf and the Imp have a few very special friends. There are the curlews, with their speckly brown bodies and long thin beaks and whistling screams, and the grouse who make a noise like an old clock running down in a hurry when they leap suddenly into the air. But these are not the favourites. The birds that the Imp and the Elf love best of all on the moorland have a beautiful crest on the tops of their heads, and they are clothed in white and dark green that looks like black from a little way off. They cry pe-e-e-e-wi, pe-e-e-e-e-wi, and the Imp cries "peewit" back to them. Some people call them plovers, and some people call them lapwings, because of the way they fly, but we always call them the "peewits." All through the spring and summer they are there, and it is great fun to watch them, for they love to fly into the air and turn somersaults, and throw themselves about as if they were in a circus, just for fun, you know, and because it is jolly to be alive. But in the Autumn many of the birds do strange things. Some, like the swallows and martins, fly far away over the seas to warmer countries for the winter. Some only come here to spend the winter months, living in cooler countries through the summer. And the peewits, when Autumn comes, collect in tremendous flocks. All the friends and relations of our peewits on the moor seem to come and join them, and then they move away all over the country from place to place, wherever they can get food. When we go up to the moor just at this time, we see not two or three or half-a-dozen peewits, but crowds and crowds of them flying low, and strutting on the ground, with their crests high up over their heads.

The last of the three happenings is the saddest. Do you remember the haymaking and what the hay was carted away for? You remember how the farmers stored it to feed the cows in winter. At the end of the Autumn comes an evening when the cows are driven home for milking, and do not go back again. The fields are left empty all the Winter, while the red and white cows are fastened up in the byre (a byre is a nice name for a cowshed) to eat the hay. When that day comes the Imp and the Elf always walk home from the fields with the cows, and pat them and say good-bye to them at the door of the byre, and promise to come and visit them during the Winter. And then they come home to the house, and knock sadly on the door of my study, and come in and say, "Ogre, the cows have been shut up for the Winter, and nurse says we are to begin our thicker things to-morrow." And then we are all sad, for that means Winter. And I have to tell all sorts of jolly stories of King Frost and the Snow Queen before we are cheerful enough to go to bed.

Source:

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