



Falling Leaves

► THE first leaf falls. Another follows. Then a third. Soon the leaves are falling in twos, threes, by the dozen, by the score.

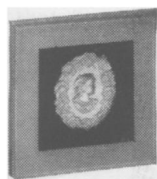
They come soaring down in dancing zigzag flight. When the wind blows they fall faster, and skip along the ground.

A falling leaf brushes the face of a man and a sharp sadness grips his heart. The man feels, not a brown leaf, but portents of his own mortality. The falling, skipping, dancing leaves do not fill him with frolicsome gladness. They set him to brooding.

For the man the falling leaves are an ending. They are an ending not alone of summer and warm sun, of the season of quick vitality. They portend a larger ending, of a year, of a hope, of some aspiration perhaps that has gone another twelve-month unfulfilled.

The man whom fall makes sad is surely a poet. But the man who thinks of autumn as a termination, with equal certainty is no naturalist.

Autumn is not an end point, but a needful natural turning point. It is the season of fruition and of preparation. It is a time for garnering all the lush and lavish products of the growing season. And it is a time when Nature, like a provident housewife, begins to set her house in order for the winter that lies ahead, and for the spring that lies beyond. A man seeing the leaves fall would be wise to prepare for the winter as well.



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Green leaves are as vulnerable to frost bite as ears of corn and man. A man, perhaps preoccupied in philosophizing grandly on doleful misty matters, might scoff at talk of earmuffs and think it premature. But a tree, which has no cozy fire to scurry to when the air gets nippy, takes its measures early.

When the nights start to grow longer and chillier, the tree loses no time. All the liquid foodstuffs begin to drain out of the leaves, back into the limbs and trunk. The sugar, starch and protein that make the green leaf such a tasty tidbit to browsing animals are put into winter storage.

Then a chemical transformation takes place in the leaf. The green matter, the all-important chlorophyll that performs the miracle of turning sunlight into plant food, breaks down and becomes colorless. At this time the other colors, which have been in the leaf all the time but dominated by the larger amount of green, seem to burst forth riotously. The yellow, the reds, the purples, which turn autumn landscapes into speechless wonder, are microscopic bits of pigment or dissolved dyes in the cell-sap.

Meanwhile at the base of the stem of the leaf a double layer of a corky substance is forming. Eventually it splits, each half acting to bind up the open wound caused by the severing of the leaf from the branch.

The tree is sealed up for winter. The leaf, its usefulness over for the year, sails free, floating, planing, zigzagging downwards. The leaf falls, and it brushes the face of a man. The man feels, not a brown leaf, but a nameless portent in the autumn of his heart.

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