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SOME AUTUMN DAYS IN IOWA

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SOME AUTUMN DAYS IN IOWA

Some Autumn Days in Iowa

BY
Frederick John Lazell

CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA
THE IOWAY CLUB
NINETEEN HUNDRED SIX

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FRED J. LAZELL

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FOREWORD

Most of the written inspiration for nature lovers has hitherto come from the east, principally New England. Thoreau, Emerson, Bryant, Whittier, Burroughs, — these and many others have written, with consummate charm and beauty, of Nature as seen near the Atlantic seaboard. The popular nature books and even many of the scientific works have all been written in the east and it has seemed to some as if there was nothing worth while on this side of the Appalachians, certainly not on this side of the Mississippi.

But one need not go to Concord to find Walden woods and ponds. Had Thoreau lived in Iowa he could have written just as richly, and had Bryant's home been on the hither side of the Father of Waters he would have sung just as sweetly. By and by some writer with the learning of a naturalist and the soul of a poet shall tell of the beauties in this great garden of Eden which is embraced by two mighty rivers and is filled with the color and perfume of the rarest flowers and the music of the sweetest of the singing birds.

Well might the Indians call this state "Ioway, Ioway, beautiful land."

These little papers have no such ambitions. They are rather memories of some long happy autumn days out of doors in Iowa, with an effort to catch here and there some glimpses of

"That thread of the all-sustaining beauty
Which runs through all and doth all unite."

Cedar Rapids, Iowa,

November 30, 1906.

AN OCTOBER DAY IN IOWA

AN OCTOBER DAY IN IOWA

Ay, thou art welcome, heaven's delicious breath!
When woods begin to wear the crimson leaf,
And suns grow meek, and the meek suns grow brief,
And the year smiles as it draws near its death.
Wind of the sunny south! oh, still delay
In the gay woods and in the golden air,
Like to a good old age released from care,
Journeying, in long serenity, away.
In such a bright, late quiet would that I
Might wear out life like thee, 'mid bowers and brooks,
And, dearer yet, the sunshine of kind looks,
And music of kind voices ever nigh;
And when my last sand twinkles in the glass
Pass silently from men as thou dost pass.
—William Cullen Bryant.

BRYANT'S poems on October are the best to be found in the language because he got closer to nature than any other poet. The call of the wild was ever in his ear. He loved nature with a love that knew neither variableness nor shadow of turning and he embraced every opportunity to "steal an hour from study and care, and hie me away to the woodland scene." You may take a book of his poems to the woods and verify every line and phrase. That is why his

nature poems are the next best thing to nature herself.

But nature is better. No description of nature can be equal to nature herself. One day in the October fields and woods to him who hath eyes to see is worth more than all the sonnets and prose poems on October he has ever read. And after such a day the sonnets and the prose poems will mean more than they have ever done before. The sunrise "boils, pure gold, o'er the cloud cup's brim" as it did for Pippa, the mill girl, long ago in Asolo. The glorious blue of the cloudless sky, the warm sun which "pours out on the fair earth his quiet smile — the sweetest of the year," the wondrous blending of colors, the tang of the autumn breeze and the chance to find the last and best flower of all the year — the fringed gentian — combine to make a day in October a resistless attraction "to him who in the love of nature holds communion with her visible forms" and tries to understand "her various language."

South of the four northern tiers of counties the fringed gentian is comparatively a rare visitor. But here and there it may be found well down beyond the central line and if you have the instinct and the patience and the determination you shall find it — the flower of which many of

the poets have sung, and none more sweetly than Bryant:

“Thou blossom bright with autumn dew,
And colored with the heaven’s own blue,
That openest, when the quiet light
Succeeds the keen and frosty night,

“Thou waitest late and comest alone,
When woods are bare and birds are flown,
And frosts and shortening days portend
The aged year is near its end.

“Then doth thy sweet and quiet eye
Look through its fringes to the sky,
Blue — blue — as if that sky let fall
A flower from its cerulean wall.”

In Iowa the fringed gentian comes before the “woods are bare and birds are flown.” It may be different in New England.

But if you would find the fringed gentian you must be a lowly pilgrim. With an automobile or even a horse your quest would be as fruitless as was the quest of Sir Launfal when with golden spurs and richest mail he rode forth to seek the holy grail. You must go afoot and walk perchance half a day through long slough grass, with your clothing covered with Spanish needles, beggar lice, tick trefoil, sand burs and cockleburs until you look almost as forlorn as the leper who begged an alms from Sir Launfal, and then, per-

haps, just as you come to a little brook like that from which Sir Launfal gave the beggar a drink you will see a patch of fringed gentians. Then you may sit and let their surpassing loveliness satiate your soul.

There is no blue in the flower kingdom quite so enchanting as the blue of the fringed gentian. "Such a dark blue," writes Thoreau, "surpassing that of the male blue bird's back." Even Bryant's line does not fully measure the blueness. The deep dark blue of the fringed gentian is bluer than any Iowa sky. And Iowa skies are reputed to be the bluest in the world unless it be those of Switzerland.

In the big sloughs which often lie at the foot of what the geologists call the "paha ridges" the flower hunter may often find the fringed gentian (*Gentiana crinita*), and the closed gentian (*Gentiana andrewsii*). One specimen of the fringed gentian found recently had upwards of three dozen blossoms on a single plant, many of them withered, but a large number of them magnificent in their beauty, two inches and more long and as big round as a man's third finger. But don't pull up every blossom to be found. One for the vase on your library table, and one for an appreciative flower-lover will be enough. For the gentian is an annual and is too rare to be ruthlessly destroyed.

And Emerson's lines are always to be remembered:

"Hast thou named all the birds without a gun?
Loved the wood-rose and left it on its stalk?
At rich men's tables eaten bread and pulse?
Unarmed, faced danger with a heart of trust?
And loved so well a high behavior,
In man or maid, that thou from speech refrained,
Nobility more nobly to repay?
Oh, be my friend and teach me to be thine!"

The closed gentian is more common and may be found by the roadside here and there. Until one finds the fringed gentian it seems to be the fairest flower of the fall. It also is a wonderful blue; a more intense delft-like blue than the soft rich blue of the fringed gentian. John Burroughs finds it "intensely blue;" Thoreau calls it "a transcendant blue, a splendid blue, light in the shade and turning purple with age. Bluer than the bluest sky, they lurk in the moist and shady recesses of the banks," he writes. This is sometimes true, but not always. There are plenty of them to be found in the open meadows, but water is essential. They are never found far from wet and swamp-like soil and are usually half concealed by the long rank grass. Thomas Wentworth Higginson calls them "barrel gentians," which is a local name for them in some states. And indeed

they are shaped exactly like little barrels. But such beautiful blossoms ought to suggest something better than barrels. They never open. The blue corolla is closed at the mouth as if to protect the stigmas and stamens from the cold and only they see its inward beauty. The flower is like many a mother, the beauty of whose life is never seen in society, but only by her loved ones at home; or like the Sister of Mercy, whom the world knoweth not, but whose gentle ways and kindly deeds mean so much to the sick or to the children committed to her care. The beauty of the life is there and it is very real; but it is never paraded.

There is another beautiful little gentian to be found in many parts of Iowa. It is the five-flowered gentian (*Gentiana quinque-flora*). It is much smaller than the others, and a much paler blue. Usually it has five blossoms on a stem, not always. The cymose branches curve out and up, making the plant look like a delicately beautiful candlestick, at the shrine of a saint. This gentian is often found growing abundantly on the face of a limestone cliff, where the argillaceous shales have weathered into a marly slope which is kept moist by the water which trickles down from above.

These gentians are almost the only flowers in October. Here and there is a straggling aster

and occasionally a blossom of the bonny bouncing bet (*Saponaria officinalis*), whose bland leaves and swollen stems make an oasis of green in a surrounding desert of brown.

To get the most out of an October day one must go to the riverside, even if it be necessary to take a short railway journey. On the way down late blooming asters nod pleasantly as the car passes and red-cheeked boys are in the big apple trees shaking down the last of the red-cheeked apples for the red-cheeked girls below. Great and countless ears of corn hang ready for the husker, one of the biggest and best ripened crops for years. Most of the pastures have been baked brown by a long dry spell, but here and there a meadow of blue grass and clover is as green as the garden of Eden. A slight haze hangs over the horizon and tints the far woods with purple. By the river side, the flowers have mostly gone. Here and there a belated lobelia or bell-flower gives a glint of blue. The lemon-colored sneeze-weed yet lingers here and there and the marigold adds a richer tone. But the glory of the flowers has gone and passed into the trees. The Virginia creeper rises to the top of a tall hickory and the sun smiles on the flaming embrace. High on the bluffs glow the sun-painted leaves of the sumac.

Down the slope is a wondrous commingling of colors, which is mirrored in the far and sunny side of the river, carmine and crimson, russet and rose, brown and bronze, gold and green and gray. The glory of the oaks is at its height. In the pure warm sunlight of the afternoon the red oak (*Quercus rubra*) and the scarlet oak (*Quercus coccinea*) glow like living crimson, the effect heightened by the green leaves of the white oak (*Quercus alba*) standing side by side with them and slower to yield to the dying year. Even the brilliance of the sumac is forgotten in this more majestic splendor of the oaks. Nearby the crimson is vivid, intense, thrilling. Across the valley and far up the bluffs it softens until it meets the sky-line in an indescribable beauty of rose-red and purple.

We see the beauty of the crimson oaks as Arthur's knights saw the vision of the Holy Grail:

"Blessed are Bors, Lancelot and Percivale,
For these have seen according to their sight."

The sounds of the year are dying, like the flowers and the leaves. The whirr and wheeze of the myriads of katydids and crickets which buzzed so incessantly in late August and early September is reduced to a monotone. The noise was

their love call and the mating season has passed. A mud turtle lazily splashes from a rock into the water and a seedpod overhead bursts and drops a seed at your feet. You hear a rustling over the dry leaves and look up to see a gray-tailed squirrel hastening, nut in mouth, toward his winter's hoard, setting man the example for life's winter. The jewel weed has burst its last pod and stands bare with its seeds scattered in a big circle.

Most of the birds have gone, but not all. The tap, tap, tap of the wood-pecker is heard, and the harsh call of the blue-jay. A flock of crows are holding an afternoon praise-meeting a hundred rods away. A score of migrating robins, fat and chirping, flutter down from near-by trees and drink at the brink of the river. Farther on the splendor falls, not on castle walls or snowy summits, old in story, but on tree-crowned heights unmarred by hand of man since Indians sat among them and told the legends of their tribes. The long light shakes across the faintly tremulous river. You give a great shout and listen to hear the purple glens replying and the echoes dying, dying — as the day and year are dying, slowly, sweetly, grandly, like a good man whose life has borne the fruits of honesty, kind words and helpful deeds, and who is going serene and unafraid to his long winter

sleep beneath the snows until the spring sunshine of the resurrection day breaks in all its beauty.

Far across the western prairie, the sun sinks in a shimmering sea of amber and gold. Slowly the glory fades to gray. "The darkening air thrills with a sense of the triumphing night." By-and-by Venus glows in the western sky like a beautiful evening lamp. One by one the constellations come — "the sweet influence of the Pleiades," Andromeda and Pegasus, the Hyades with Aldebaran, Canis Major with Sirius, whose fervid reign is over. The darkness deepens; it is night:

"Night with her train of stars,
And her great gift of sleep."

SOME NOVEMBER DAYS IN IOWA

SOME NOVEMBER DAYS IN IOWA

"No warmth, no cheerfulness, no healthful ease,
No comfortable feel in any member,
No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees,
No fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds,
November."

Poor Thomas Hood! He lived in England. For him the yellow fog, the gray skies, the bleak winds, the cheerless rains. If he could have spent one November in Iowa he would never have pictured Autumn sitting melancholy and tearful, alone upon a mossy stone, reckoning up the dead and gone:

"The year's in the wane,
There is nothing adorning,
The night hath no eve,
And the day has no morning,
Cold winter gives warning."

Most of the British poets sang in a similar strain. Shelley writes a dirge for the "dead cold year," and asks the months

"From November to May
In your saddest array
To follow the bier
Of the dead cold year
And like dim shadows watch by her sepulcher."

The New England poets have been wont to follow these conceptions of the later Autumn. Whittier sees all things around him stark and dumb, praying for the snows to come. Bryant mourns because "The south wind searches for the flowers, whose fragrance late he bore, and sighs to find them in the wood and by the stream no more." But the Iowa poet ought to sing in a happier strain. October in Iowa runs well into the month of November; for the first half of the month there is little difference. The many warm, sweet sunny days take all of the sadness out of the dying year. The sun smiles gently and benignly through the smoky air and gives a halo of amber and purple to the soft sepias and gleaming grays of the woodlands which a month ago were brilliant with crimson and gold.

"No flowers, no leaves, no birds," forsooth! If only Hood could have taken a walk through an Iowa wood, some bright sunny morning in early November. The willows stand guard at the very entrance to the wood. All through October when the wondrous coloration of the oaks and maples, alders and aspens, was running up and down the gamut of brilliancy, the willows retained their soft and restful green. Now the green is slowly searing to brown and the leaves are fluttering down

in the sunshine while a flock of snowbirds (*Juncos*) with their bright yellow bills and their slate grey heads and throats make merry among them. Down the trunk of the tree runs the white-breasted nuthatch and his incessant tap-tap-tap gives emphasis to the stillness of the mild November morning.

The savants say that there is no state in all the world more favored with bird-life than Iowa. The state lies in the embrace of two mighty rivers with many fine long tributaries and along and between these rivers the great flood of bird-life goes northward in the springtime and southward in the fall, filling the air with matchless music and charming the eye with incomparable color. In his "Kim" Kipling speaks of the Great Trunk Road as the highway for all sorts and conditions of Hindoo life; so Iowa is a highway for the vernal and the autumnal flood of bird-life. The robin and the hepatica, the blue bird and the spring beauty follow the springtime up the valleys; the hepatica and the spring beauty show their beauty no more until the next spring, but the robin and the blue bird pass through again late in the fall.

A few robins are usually seen as late as the first week in November. Then there are some hardy little creatures which stay with us all winter though one must go to the woods to see them. Among them are the chickadee, the nuthatch, the waxwing, the American gold-finch, the blue jay,

the crow, the snowbird, and some of the sparrows and woodpeckers; the Iowa woods and fields are never wholly deserted. The scream of the blue jay, the caw of the crow and the chick-a-dee-dee-dee of the little black capped bird which bears the name are all familiar sounds in November.

No flowers, no leaves, said Hood. Once, again, poor Hood! In this walk through the Iowa woodlands in early November, there are several varieties of late asters, some straggling blossom in the sheltered places, of the Indian tobacco (*Lobelia inflata*), pepper grass (*Lepidium Virginicum*), and sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*). If one should set out to swell the list and should call a few fading petals a blossom he might doubtless swell the list to five times this number. The dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) may often be found in November, the yellow blossom forming the golden period at the end of the flowering season.

How many have seen a dandelion? Everyone, of course. Yes, but how many have really seen one? When is its stalk the longer? When is it drooping, and when does it stand erect? It was Darwin who first noticed that the stalk is short and drooping while the flower is full of yellow gold, but long and erect when the flowers have developed

into the white and fluffy seeds. Of course, everyone knew it after Darwin had recorded his observations. But no one had really seen it before.

As to the leaves — well, the common bramble shows the bronze green of its leaves to better advantage now than at any time during the summer. The same is true of the cat-brier or carrion-flower (*Smilax herbacea*), the plant which has so offensive an odor in the flowering season, but makes up for it by its graceful green vines and leaves the rest of the season until well along into November. The oaks have shed many of their leaves by the end of the first week in November, though some linger much longer. The white willow falls about the same time.

Through the woodlands which slope gently upward toward the crest of the ridge there is a thick carpet of the fallen leaves and among these another nature lover, with an eye for his table, is poking with a stick. He has been out for an hour and he carries a peach basket which he has almost filled with mushrooms (*Armillaria mellea*). "You can hardly make a mistake at this time of the year," he says as he goes down on one knee and cuts off a fine bunch with the table-knife which he carries. "See this growth like a cobweb from the stem to the gills? When you see that you may put the mushroom in your basket and take it home for your dinner. Be sure to gather those that are fresh and

firm. Those that have grown old and flabby are not good."

Over the crest of the ridge and down the slope to the river the grays and the sepias are brightened by the high notes of the late orange-colored pods and the scarlet seeds of the waxwork or bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*), also, here and there, the burning bush, or wahoo (*Euonymus atropurpureus*) with its numerous and beautiful long drooping peduncles and deeply four-lobed crimson pods through which the scarlet seeds are bursting. This is one of the most ornamental of the native shrubs. The wonder is that more of them are not seen in gardens. And by-the-way, many of the wild shrubs, to say nothing of the wild herbs might well find a place around the dwelling of the nature lover. They are far more beautiful and appropriate than some of the artificial ornamental oddities. The hardy clematis, the common virgin's bower (*Clematis Virginiana*), the Virginia creeper (*Ampelopsis quinquefolia*), the steeple bush (*Spireae tomentosa*), the common meadow-sweet (*Spireae salitcifolia*), the goat's beard (*Spireae aruncus*), the black haw (*Viburnum prunifolium*), the honey-suckle (*Lonicera grata*), the cat-brier (*Smilas herbacea*) — at least one town lot has many of these and many have wondered from what far-away state these beautiful shrubs were imported.

Close by the river-side there lies a mighty fallen oak. The forces of age, erosion and the winds have laid the monarch low and Spenser's beautiful lines come to the mind:

"There grew an aged tree on the green
A goodly oak sometime it had been;
With arms full and strong and largely displayed,
But of their leaves they were disarrayed:
The body big and mightily plight,
Thoroughly rooted and of wondrous height;
Whilom had been king of the field,
And mochel mast to the husband did yield,
And with his nuts larded many a swine;
But now the gray moss marred his rine.
His bared boughs were beaten with storms;
His top was bald and wasted with worms
His honor decayed, his branches sere."

There is something pathetic in the fall of so mighty a monarch of the forest. It is like the fall of a strong, forceful, helpful leader of men, long eminent in the community, sought by those who needed help or inspiration, powerful and masterful in the councils of the state or the nation. The weaknesses of old age, the storms of abuse and the undermining influences of those eager to force him out and occupy his place, finally lay him low before his appointed time — everyone can think of such a character.

The old tree has brought up large quantities of dirt and among its gnarled roots there are also

many fragments of limestone rock, for this is a limestone slope and the gray masses of castellated rocks beautified by the bright green mosses jut out here and there between the trees every few rods. Prying out one of the pieces of rock one is surprised to see it practically a solid conglomerate mass of marine shells, of various sizes and shapes. Other pieces are tried with the same result. Here are the quaint little shells of the Devonian series, reminders of the time, many millions of years ago, when Iowa with many of the adjoining states was a vast warm sea. A little more investigation shows the evidences of the coral formation which rises at Rock Island, at Iowa City and here and there up northward into Buchanan county. Little coiled shells, like worms, cornet shaped tubelets, these and many others are all found either in this mass of rock or near-by.

But the best of the discovery is a little further along the river bank on a rocky open place which goes to the water's edge. This was the only place anywhere in the vicinity last summer where grew the partridge pea (*Cassia chamaecrista*). The plant was so beautiful in July that no one would have thought of looking to see what lay beneath it. It was one of the most interesting plants of the summer, with each of its leaves made up of ten to fifteen pairs of linear oblong leaflets, a cup-shaped gland beneath the lowest pair and the large

showy yellow flowers on their slender pedicles making the bank a mass of bright color. The leaflets close at night and during stormy weather and they are also somewhat sensitive to the touch. There are five large yellow petals, four of them spread out flat, but the fifth, a lateral petal, is shaped like a shallow spoon about the stamens while the pistil extends downward across the broad petal beneath. This plant has the "nectar guides" common in the leguminosæ family. At the base of the two upper petals and the other lateral one there are spots of crimson purple which are like sign boards for the insects, telling them where the nectar lies. The broad lower petal is the natural stepping stone for the insect and when he alights he brushes pollen from another flower upon the stigma. Then he goes towards the crimson spots and begins to gather the nectar and as he does so he brushes against the stamens and receives the pollen to be deposited upon the stigma of the next flower. The curved petal is said to be designed to prevent insects from entering the flower the wrong way. The right entrance is via the broad petal doorstep, brushing against the stigma first and the stamens afterward.

But the bright yellow flowers are all gone in November and there is time to look at the rocks beneath. The very first one picked up proves to

be a bit of coral which the marble men call birds-eye, but which scientists call *Acervularia Davidsonii*. The long name means that the piece of coral is shaped like a cake and was discovered by Davidson and so the piece of coral might be called Davidson's coral-cake. It is a most beautiful structure. The upper surface shows a fine pattern of six-sided cells, about a quarter inch in diameter. A delicately crenulated wall runs around each cell. In the middle of the cell there is an apparent small cylindrical wall. From this radial lines run to the outer wall — these are called septa. Now if you bring a piece of this coral home and take it to a marble cutter he will split the cake vertically for you and polish up one side. That process will divide the space between each two septa into delicate horizontal dissepiments and the polished side of the coral will look like a piece of beautifully woven cloth. Then when you go to the Field Museum in Chicago you may visit the geology cases and find a specimen just like yours. You may find the ledge here mentioned at Midriver Park. Farther back on the bank you may pry some fine specimens out of the clay, which is said to be their natural home. If you have a bright member of the high school geology class with you he will name many other interesting specimens which you find in the same place: *Favosites Emmonsii*, *Heliophyllum halli*, and several others.

Every nature lover ought to be able to tell a good November squirrel story and the following has no merit except that of being strictly true. The red squirrel was making a big rustling among the dry leaves in search of nuts and he was startled when he suddenly caught sight of a stranger. Following his natural inclination he bounded into a tree, but it happened to have a long horizontal limb and along this he ran directly towards the "enemy." For a moment the representative of the genus *Sciurus* and the representative of the genus *Homo* stood still and looked at each other face to face. Then, much to the surprise of the latter, the former came forward along the limb until he sat in the fork of the branch not more than ten feet away, sitting straight up, his eyes shining. The kodak was cautiously lifted, the lever pushed over, the squirrel paused for perhaps half a minute. Then at the first tones of the human voice he bounded back among the dry leaves and thence up another tree.

Poor little squirrel. Some heartless pot-hunter has doubtless bagged him ere this.

November in Iowa, brings the first snow. And no matter how dreary the snows may become before the winter has ended, the first snow is always beautiful. Its approach may be known by the antics of

the sparrows. They congregate in flocks, nervously darting hither and thither, chirping all the while as if they were oppressed with a sense of coming disaster. But the next day when the snow is falling heavily, these same birds will sit in the tree tops and make the merriest kind of music. The late Dr. Beardshear in one of his papers, speaks of wrapping himself in his great coat and lying down in a grove, allowing the feathery flakes to cover him while overhead the sparrows caroled merrily. It was Dr. Beardshear also who wrote: "I have put old Mother Nature to the severest test even in the coldest January night in Iowa by a leisurely stroll through the woods and down an old streamway for miles, with food of thought, suggestions of providence and blessings, yea, a warmful sympathy which made the fierce winter night a retreat of the most sacred thought and uplift."

Not many of us can reach heights like this. But everyone can break the miserable bondage of stuffy, superheated rooms and go for a long tramp through field and through woodland, enjoying the pure air and the glorious sunlight, sweetening his mind and enriching his soul. He can appreciate the sublime beauty of the lines of the Psalmist:

"He giveth snow like wool; He scattereth the hoarfrost like ashes.

“He casteth forth His ice like morsels; who can stand before His cold.

“He sendeth out His word and melteth them. He bloweth with His wind, and the waters flow.”

They had snow and cold in the promised land of Palestine. And David enjoyed it; he was a nature-lover.

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