

AUTUMN SOUNDS

BY ROBERT SPARKS WALKER

TO-DAY the spirit of autumn is wide awake. Everytime the quilts slid off my body during the night, the frosty air pinched my flesh so severely that I was quite uncomfortable. Frosty air is a dependable alarm clock, but it sometimes chooses a most inconvenient hour to call one from his slumber. A habit with forty years of momentum called me promptly at four o'clock this November morning. An hour and fifteen minutes later, I found my wandering feet begging my body to follow them into a piece of wooded land where the walnut trees stand out ruggedly bare against the clear sky. The white oaks are giving up their once green leaves, now red from excitement of their contents rushing for bud-storage rooms. Willow oaks have given back to the soil fully a half of the foliage that it gave them last spring, and liberal leaf-gifts are still being placed on wind-contribution plates each time they are passed. There is perfect rhythm in each leaf of the willow oak as it falls sideways turning over and over as the seed of the maple tree reaches the ground.

The ash tree's crown has turned its back on autumn and is watching eagerly for the appearance of winter somewhere on the horizon. The persimmon tree has removed its green foliage, leaving loads of ripe fruit that tempt the appetite. The hawthorn has followed the persimmon tree's example, save the parsley leaf species whose foliage-calender reads as green as it did in the month of June.

The elders persist in wearing the greenest garments and, how often autumn must characterize them as "strong-headed children!" Without a doubt, the most beautiful autumn suit is worn by a clump of young honey locusts. If you have never found a young tree of this kind in autumn, then with-hold the prize from the maple, the

sumac, the sourwood, and the sweetgum until you have met a family of young honey locusts springing up from an old stump. Their small leaflets painted a deep gold and blended with green, make a dress that cannot be surpassed in autumnal beauty.

The evergreen foliage of trumpet vine is more conspicuous now than it was during the summer, since its dark background composed of the bark of its tree-host pushes it almost squarely into your face. However, the foliage of trumpet creeper has departed, and its vine-body is so bare that it looks somewhat dull as it stares across at its kinsman, who is a keen competitor when the flowers are blooming.

Greenbriers that used to saw my flesh unmercifully between the boyhood toes of my feet, seem determined to-day to keep their leaves green throughout the winter. Their blue-black berries would make good signs for pawnbrokers, but the plant seems to have nothing to lend except beauty.

Boneset's perfoliate leaves persist, but its flowerhead is drying up. Poison ivy is really bold enough to try to color up its green leaves, but the most of them have already been shed. As to the English sparrow as a pest it becomes unimportant compared to poison ivy. This vile plant is literally taking complete possession of many favored natural haunts, which Nature has allotted to the growth of her sweetest wild flowers. We do not seem to be able to check it in its domineering career.

While the crickets are fiddling away, a little wren mischievously strikes a vocal banjo string, and the chewinks are turning over their brown leaf-carpets along old fence rows. Red-head woodpeckers are fussing this morning, perhaps over a disagreement as to the proper location of their winter storage of the acorn crop; but the blue jay, for once, is attending strictly to his own affairs. The field sparrow and crested titmouse are eating their usual morning meals, and the grating cry of the sparrow hawk is unheeded by all the birds I have under observation. Across the woods, the loud hoarse calls of the crow come beating upon my ears. But then it would not be November if the call of the crow was unheard.

Autumn ends the careers of tens of thousands insects, spiders, and plants. Every natural noise that I can recall hearing in autumn bears the sorrowful suggestion of the approach of death for all living things. I am of the opinion that if it were possible for the

flowers to join the insects and the migratory birds that their songs too, would be tinged with melancholy.

It seems to be a design of the Creator that such should be the tone of autumn sounds. There is much harmony in the great sea of insect music that swells the earth at evening in late summer, but much of it is simply the death rattle in Nature's throat.

In the spring, we have the toads and frogs, chiefly, to furnish the evening music; but by late summer they are silent. Few insects besides the field crickets persist in singing later than the coming of frost in autumn. Many of the insect fiddlers perish after having left their eggs that will carry their races forward another year.

As much as I enjoy hearing the tens of thousands of insects in one great choir in late summer evenings and in early autumn, like a traffic officer the choir master holds up a hand and I halt mentally and physically.

It is difficult to hear anything merry in the twilight and evening voices of Nature's creatures in late summer and in early autumn. Everything has a purpose, and the naturalist who hews rigidly to the lines of science will declare that it stands for nothing but the mating of the sexes. But to me these sounds have and always will have a deeper significance. However, there is a difference. If not, then why does the cardinal bird in late summer and autumn sing his songs in a tone barely above a whisper? Does he feel, as I do, that we should tiptoe as lightly about the couch of the dying year as we do about the bedside of a father who is breathing his last?

Nature is worn and weary when autumn comes; scenes as well as sounds conspire to turn the human mind back on the past year and take an inventory of its achievements. I pity the person who is not thus influenced by autumn's sweetest sounds and richest colors, and who is unable to see where, in the year that is going out so rapidly, he has erred, where he has been unkind, unmerciful, perhaps unjust in criticisms if not in his transactions not only with mankind, but with all animal life about him!

For me, when Nature ushers her invisible choir out on the evening stage and the music starts, one by one memory moves the leaves of that year's deeds, pausing here and there to underscore with a blue pencil the mistakes of which I am conscious. Autumn sounds seal my lips as mysteriously as if I were hypnotized, but spreads wide open the gateway to my mind and heart.

And so I go into the darkness as noiselessly as the night itself, and sit or stand beneath the arms of a tree with Vega and Altair holding silver capped tapers over my head. There I stay for hours and absorb the trills and whistles that roar and reverberate as the billows at sea beat rhythmically on a ragged shore. I do not force myself to do any thinking. Something out of the invisible leads me then; and when I am conscious again, my soul emerges refreshed, and I come away more conscious than ever of the few evenings that remain to me before it is my time to go the same way that most of autumn's evening trillers and whistlers are going. Many of them have simply gone aboard the ship of death, and these are their final songs that they send back to us as they draw near the eternal port.

The forerunner of all of this is the katydid, which comes traditionally three months before frost. He is the nocturnal rasper. The cicada or harvest fly is the diurnal advance agent and stays until frost. Then come the crickets, the tree crickets, and the myriads of grasshoppers. Some play the trombone, some the cornet, some the bugle, some the fife, some the flute, some the saxophone, some the picco'lo, and some the xylophone.

But of the thousands of insects that join in this nocturnal orchestra, there is one that reaches the greatest depth. His voice is the climax, yet the most magical. There are two sounds in Nature that penetrate deeper into my heart than any others. The song of the wood thrush is one; the song of this nocturnal grasshopper is the other. The latter is a trill, and yet it is a whistle, so sweet, so sonorous, and so magical, that of all the mighty autumn songs, his is heard above the others. As it seems to originate in waves on both right and left, it ascends and unites in the skies and keeps ascending until it bombards the very gates of heaven. It is one of the purest nocturnal sounds that I have ever listened to, and gains much volume in the evening from seven to ten o'clock. In warm evenings of late summer and early fall it comes with the twilight and closes with the dawn. For over forty years I have been trying to get a view of the insect that is capable of making this rich music, but not until September, 1927, was I successful. A person with the imagination of a child can easily conceive of this sound being made by a cherub dweller of the heavenly seas. When I was a child I could find no person who could tell me about it, and I simply referred to it as the singing stars above my head.

Many of the nocturnal fiddling insects are apt at ventriloquism, which makes it a discouraging task to discover the author of a certain classical autumnal selection. If you have never had the exasperating experience of finding a tree cricket, or long horned grasshopper, or some other nightly singing insect, suppose you try to locate the first fiddler that you hear near you. He will send you searching to your right; and when you go there, he will send you to the left; then forward; and if you had wings, you might even try them in locating the elusive voice. It is as elusive as the end of the rainbow and almost as difficult to capture.

It is a remarkable coincidence that the wood thrush is a gifted ventriloquist and so is this whistling insect. On the night of the above date, I went out to witness the opening of some moonflowers. It was growing dusk, and while I was standing patiently by a grape vine waiting for the arrival of the thrilling moment, one of my favorite forty-year singers burst forth scarcely two feet away. He was sitting on a grape leaf. I listened to two stanzas, and then quick as a flash my left arm swung in a semi-circle and the long-hunted prize was mine! He was simply a greenish long-horned grasshopper and then he went with me into the house where I took an accurate description of him. I shall henceforth know him by no other name than the whistling grasshopper. One of the greatest thrills that can come into the life of any naturalist is just such an experience as this.

During the evenings in the early autumn days, I wake up in the night and hear tiny 'cheepings' of broken bits of bird voices, as they move southwards. They are the same voices that I hear in spring-time when the birds are coming from the tropics, seeking suitable situations for the summer months.

When such sounds break out at midnight while the earth is still, they add a weirdness to the night, since their small bodies are invisible in the brightest moonshine. Migratory birds have odd habits. Some of the nocturnal birds choose daylight for migrating, while many of the birds with diurnal habits are nocturnal travelers.

As a general rule, the birds seem somewhat worn out by family cares by the time autumn comes, and there is frequently a dearth of bird songs at this time. Even the ever persistent mockingbird often takes a rest from his vocal labors in autumn. In my latitude, although we frequently have zero weather, the mockingbird does not

migrate. We really have more of them some winters than we do in summer. This is accounted for from the fact that some mockingbirds that summer farther north, stop en route south and spend the winter with our birds. This is true of Bewick's wren, also of the vesper sparrow. Bewick's wren and the mockingbird are two of our most dependable singers for both the country and suburban homes. Yet it seems that John Burroughs in his declining years was not able to appreciate this bird. In his book entitled "Birds and Poets," a collection of very pleasantly written essays, which was published in 1877, one year before my birth, he pays a worthy tribute to our mockingbird; but in later life, he labeled him as a mere polyglot. By permission of his publishers, I quote the following paragraph taken from "Under the Apple Trees," published in 1916:

"The mockingbird is a theatrical creature, both in manners and delivery. I have heard it in Jamaica, in Florida, and now in southern California, and I have no good word to say for it. It is a Southern bird, and has more the quality of the Southern races than our birds have. Northern birds are quieter, sweeter-tempered, softer-voiced, and more religious in tone."

I have often heard it said that the mockingbird really sings the songs of many birds better than they can do. In fact, Mr. Burroughs makes the above statement in his earlier remarks on this bird. But such a thing is quite impossible. No mockingbird is ever able to reproduce a song better than the owner of that song. If he did such a thing, might not the mockingbird claim the song as his own?

I have my doubts that Mr. Burroughs was ever thoroughly acquainted with the mockingbird. Many times I have heard this favorite bird when, if I had judged him solely on his achievements at those times, I certainly would have been slow to have tendered him a place on the front row of seats as a songster. But he is a rare bird. His ability to imitate almost any bird, from the squeaky noise of the ruby-throated hummingbird to the wood thrush, makes him a wonderful bird when it comes to mimicry. There is the sweetest music in his voice when he copies the song of a sweet singer; but when he imitates the harsh cries of the sparrow hawk, the feline calls of the catbird, or the potrack of the guinea-fowl, no person expects to hear anything musical in his reproductions.

There are few people, especially among the ornithologists and

bird lovers, who will agree with Mr. Burroughs. His remarks about the mockingbird are not nearly as ridiculous as the statement made about the Northern birds being sweeter-tempered and more religious in tone! That is the most absurd statement I have ever read from the pen of any naturalist. If such were the facts, proof would be available.

Mr. Frank M. Chapman, the well-known ornithologist when asked for an opinion on this criticism made by Mr. Burroughs, said to me:

"I think very few people familiar with the song of the mockingbird would endorse Mr. Burroughs' estimate of it, nor do I believe that his generalization in regard to the songs of northern birds would be supported by ornithologists. The Pine Wood Sparrow, which is restricted to our Southern states, I rank among our leading song birds, and I am on record as describing its song as possessing 'all the exquisite tenderness and pathos of the melody of the hermit thrush: indeed, in purity and in tone and in execution I should consider this sparrow the superior songster.'"

A few years ago in June when I spent a Sunday along the esplanade of the Charles River basin in Boston, Massachusetts. I did think the song sparrows there sang more sweetly than any I had ever listened to from the Gulf to New England. But I could find no logical reason; so I began to search the woods, and three years later, in the same month, I found the song sparrow that had the identical sweet tone as the Boston sparrows, along the wooded banks of the Tellico River in eastern Tennessee.

I have listened to the songs of many birds in the North, and I have yet my first bird to locate that has a sweeter tone than birds of the same species that dwell in the South.

The mind is capable of making as permanent a record of the impressions that come through the ear as it does those that are transmitted through the eye. He who is heedful of the songs and calls for birds in his childhood and then listens to them in later life, will have his memory thrust many times into the sea of retrospection. This is just what some of the autumn sounds do for me. Within the past week, certain sounds of my autumnal grasshoppers hurled me back into the past, and soon I had my old McGuffey's readers and the Blue Back Spelling book down, traveling over the same mental roads that I did in childhood.

The autumn sounds returned my heart again to the old-time thrill of

“Oh, were you ne'er a schoolboy,
And did you never train,
And feel that swelling of the heart,
You ne'er can feel again?”

And I became a child again when I re-read,

“Come little leaf,” said the wind one day,
“Come over the meadow with me and play;
Put on your dress of red and gold,
Summer is gone and the days grow cold.”

So I, with all the melancholy that accompanies the sound of autumn, from the tree cricket's sonorous trill to the blunt sound of the woodsman's ax on a frosty morning, would dislike being cast without their range even for a single year.

Autumn sounds in Nature, whether they seem to suggest the nearness of the death of the old year or not, by the time the coldest weather comes, millions of Nature's insect noise-makers are lying stiff in their tracks.