

IX

NOVEMBER, 1859

(ÆT. 42)

Nov. 5. In Boston. — The first Indian-summer day, after an unusually cold October. Sat at the end of Long Wharf for coolness, but it was very warm, with scarcely a breath of wind, and so thick a haze that I could see but little way down the harbor.

Nov. 6. The river is quite low, about four inches lower than the hub [?] I used in the summer, or lower than before, this year. Yet there is more water in the mill-streams; the mill-wheels are supplied now which were stationary in the summer.

C. thinks that he saw bats last evening.

Nov. 8. A pleasant day.

P. M. — To Nut Meadow and Fair Haven Hill.

I hear a small z-ing cricket.

Coombs says that quite a little flock of pigeons bred here last summer. He found one nest in a small white pine near his pigeon-stand (where he baited them in the summer), so low he could put his hand in it(!?). I saw, while talking with him, a trout playing about in the open roadside watering-place, on the Jimmy Miles road (*i. e.* in Nut Meadow Brook), which was apparently fifteen inches long; not lurking under the bank but openly swimming up and down in midstream.

How richly and exuberantly downy are many golden-rod and aster heads now, their seed just on the point of falling or being blown away, before they are in the least weather-beaten! They are now puffed up to their utmost, clean and light.¹

The tufts of purplish withered andropogon in Withereil Glade are still as fair as ever, soft and trembling and bending from the wind; of a very light mouse-color seen from the side of the sun, and as delicate as the most fragile ornaments of a lady's bonnet; but looking toward the sun they are a brilliant white, each polished hair (of the pappus?) reflecting the November sun without its heats, not in the least yellowish or brown like the goldenrods and asters.

Nov. 9. A fine Indian-summer day. Have had pleasant weather about a week.²

Nov. 10. Rain; warm.

Nov. 11. Windy and cooler.

I observed, October 23d, wood turtles copulating in the Assabet, and a flock of goldfinches on the top of a hemlock, — as if after its seeds?

Also, October 24th, riding home from Acton, I saw the withered leaves blown from an oak by the roadside dashing off, gyrating, and surging upward into the air, so exactly like a flock of birds sporting with one another that, for a minute at least, I could not be sure they were

¹ *Vide* back, Oct. 16th.

² *Vide* Nov. 1st.

not birds; and it suggested how far the motions of birds, like those of these leaves, might be determined by currents of air, *i. e.*, how far the bird learns to conform to such currents.

The flat variety of *Lycopodium dendroideum* shed pollen on the 25th of October. That's a lycopodium path on north side of Colburn Hill.

Nov. 12. The first sprinkling of snow, which for a short time whitens the ground in spots.

I do not know how to distinguish between our waking life and a dream. Are we not always living the life that we imagine we are? Fear creates danger, and courage dispels it.

There was a remarkable sunset, I think the 25th of October. The sunset sky reached quite from west to east, and it was the most varied in its forms and colors of any that I remember to have seen. At one time the clouds were most softly and delicately rippled, like the ripple-marks on sand. But it was hard for me to see its beauty then, when my mind was filled with Captain Brown. So great a wrong as his fate implied overshadowed all beauty in the world.

Nov. 15. A very pleasant Indian-summer day.

P. M. — To Ledum Swamp.

I look up the river from the railroad bridge. It is perfectly smooth between the uniformly tawny meadows, and I see several musquash-cabins off Hubbard Shore distinctly outlined as usual in the November light.

I hear in several places a faint cricket note, either a fine z-ing or a distincter creak, also see and hear a grass-hopper's crackling flight.

The clouds were never more fairly reflected in the water than now, as I look up the Cyanean Reach from Clamshell.

A fine gossamer is streaming from every fence and tree and stubble, though a careless observer would not notice it. As I look along over the grass toward the sun at Hosmer's field, beyond Lupine Hill, I notice the shimmering effect of the gossamer, — which seems to cover it almost like a web, — occasioned by its motion, though the air is so still. This is noticed at least forty rods off.

I turn down Witherell Glade, only that I may bring its tufts of andropogon between me and the sun for a moment. They are pretty as ever.¹

In the midst of Ledum Swamp I came upon a white cat under the spruces and the water brush, which evidently had not seen me till I was within ten feet. There she stood, quite still, as if hoping to be concealed, only turning her head slowly away from and toward me, looking at me thus two or three times with an extremely worried expression in her eyes, but not moving any other part of her body. It occurred to me from her peculiar anxious expression and this motion, as if spellbound, that perhaps she was deaf; but when I moved toward her she found the use of her limbs and dashed off, bounding over the andromeda by successive leaps like a rabbit, no longer making her way through or beneath it.

¹ *Vide* Oct. 16th and Nov. 8th.

I noticed on the 3d, in Worcester,¹ that the white pines had been as full of seed there as here this year. Also gathered half a pocketful of shagbarks, of which many still hung on the trees though most had fallen.

All through the excitement occasioned by Brown's remarkable attempt and subsequent behavior, the Massachusetts Legislature, not taking any steps for the defense of her citizens who are likely to be carried to Virginia as witnesses and exposed to the violence of a slaveholding mob, is absorbed in a liquor-agency question. That has, in fact, been the all-absorbing question with it!! I am sure that no person up to the occasion, or who perceived the significance of the former event, could at present attend to this question at all. As for the Legislature, bad spirits occupied their thoughts.²

If any person, in a lecture or a conversation, should now cite any ancient example of heroism, such as Cato, or Tell, or Winkelried, passing over the recent deeds and words of John Brown, I am sure that it would be felt by any intelligent audience of Northern men to be tame and inexcusably far-fetched. I do not know of *such* words, uttered under such circumstances, in Roman, or English, or any, history.³

It is a fact proving how universal and widely related any transcendent greatness is, like the apex of a

¹ [He had been to Worcester to read his address on John Brown there. See *Familiar Letters*. pp. 358, 359; Riv. 413, 414.]

² [*Cape Cod, and Miscellanies*, p. 446; *Misc.*, Riv. 243.]

³ [*Cape Cod, and Miscellanies*, p. 441; *Misc.*, Riv. 237.]

pyramid to all beneath it, that when I now look over my extracts of the noblest poetry the best is oftenest applicable in part or wholly to this man's position. Almost any noble verse may be read either as his elegy or eulogy or be made the text of an oration on him. Indeed, such are now first discerned to be the parts of a divinely established liturgy, applicable to those rare cases for which the ritual of no church has provided, — the case of heroes, martyrs, and saints. This is the formula established on high, their burial service, to which every great genius has contributed its line or syllable. Of course the ritual of no church which is wedded to the state can contain a service applicable to the case of a state criminal unjustly condemned, — a martyr.

The sense of grand poetry read by the light of this event is brought out distinctly like an invisible writing held to the fire.¹

About the 23d of October I saw a large flock of gold-finches² (judging from their motions and notes) on the tops of the hemlocks up the Assabet, apparently feeding on their seeds, then falling. They were collected in great numbers on the very tops of these trees and flitting from one to another. Rice has since described to me the same phenomenon as observed by him there since (says he saw the birds picking out the seeds), though he did not know what birds they were. William Rice says that these birds get so much of the lettuce seed that you can hardly save any. They get sunflower seeds also. Are called "lettuce-birds" in the books.

¹ [*Cape Cod, and Miscellanies*, pp. 451, 452; *Misc.*, Riv. 249, 250.]

² *Vide* Nov. 11th.

A lady who was suitably indignant at the outrage on Senator Sumner, lamenting to me to-day the very common insensibility to such things, said that one woman to whom she described the deed and on whom she thought that she had made some impression, lately inquired of her with feeble curiosity: "How is that young man who had his head hurt? I have n't heard anything about him for a good while."

As I returned over the Corner Bridge I saw cows in the sun half-way down Fair Haven Hill next the Cliff, half a mile off, the declining sun so warmly reflected from their red coats that I could not for some time tell if they were not some still bright-red shrub oaks, — for they had no more form at that distance.

Nov. 17. Another Indian-summer day, as fair as any we've had. I go down the railroad to Andromeda Ponds this afternoon.

Captain Hubbard is having his large wood — oak and white pine, on the west of the railroad this side the pond — cut. I see one white oak felled with one hundred and fifteen rings to it; another, a red, oak has about the same number. Thus disappear the haunts of the owls. The time may come when their aboriginal *hoo-hoo-hoo* will not be heard hereabouts.

I have been so absorbed of late in Captain Brown's fate as to be surprised whenever I detected the old routine running still, — met persons going about their affairs indifferent. It appeared strange to me that the little dipper should be still diving in the river as of yore; and this suggested that this grebe might be diving here

when Concord shall be no more. Any affecting human event may blind our eyes to natural objects.¹

At the pond-side I see titmice alighting on the now hoary gray goldenrod and hanging back downward from it, as if eating its seeds; or could they have been looking for insects? There were three or four about it.

I sit in the sun on the northeast side of the first Andromeda Pond, looking over it toward the sun. How fair and memorable this prospect when you stand opposite to the sun, these November afternoons, and look over the red andromeda swamp! — a glowing, warm brown red in the Indian-summer sun, like a bed of moss in a hollow in the woods, with gray high blueberry and straw-colored grasses interspersed. And when, going round it, you look over it in the opposite direction, it presents a gray aspect.

The musquash are active, swimming about in the further pond to-day, — this Indian-summer day. Channing also sees them thus stirring in the river this afternoon.

Nov. 18. A fog this morning and yesterday morning, lasting till about 10 A. M.

I looked into the Church of England liturgy, printed near the beginning of the last century, to find a service applicable to the case of Captain Brown. The only martyr recognized and provided for by it was King Charles the First!! Of all the inhabitants of England and of the world, he was the only one whom that church made a martyr and saint of!! And now for more than

¹ [*Cape Cod, and Miscellanies*, p. 441; *Misc.*, Riv. 237.]

half a century it had celebrated his martyrdom by an annual service! What a satire on the church is that!¹

An apothecary in New Bedford told R.² the other day that a man (a Mr. Leonard) of Springfield told him that he once attended a meeting in Springfield where a woman was exhibited as in a mesmeric state, insensible to pain, — a large and fleshy woman, — and the spectators were invited to test her condition with pins or otherwise. After some had tried, one among them came forward with a vial of cowage, and, after stating to the company that it would produce intolerable irritation in the skin, he proceeded to rub a little on the woman's bare arm and on her neck. She immediately winced under it, whereupon he took out another vial containing sweet oil, and, applying a little of that, relieved her. He then stated that any one present might apply to his skin as much as he pleased. Some came forward and he laid bare his breast and when they applied it sparingly and hesitatingly, he said, "Rub away, gentlemen, — as much as you like," and he betrayed no sign of irritation. That man was John Brown.

Nov. 22. Ground white with snow a few hours. C. says that he saw to-day a procession of minnows (one to two inches long) some three or four feet wide, about forty abreast, passing slowly along northerly, close to the shore, at Wharf Rock, Flint's Pond. They were fifteen minutes passing!

¹ [*Cape Cod, and Miscellanies*, p. 446; *Misc.*, Riv. 243, 244.]

² [Mr. Ricketson was in Concord from Nov. 19th to 24th, 1859. He walked and supped with Thoreau on the 20th and went to visit him the next day. See *Daniel Ricketson and his Friends*, pp. 312-314.]

Nov. 24. The river has risen considerably, at last, owing to the rain of the 22d. Had been very low before.

See, on the railroad-slope by the pond, and also some days ago, a flock of goldfinches eating the seed of the Roman wormwood. At Spanish Brook Path, the witch-hazel (one flower) lingers.

I observe that ferns grow especially where there is an abrupt or broken bank, as where, in the woods, sand has been anciently dug out of a hillside to make a dam with and the semicircular scar has been covered with a sod and shrubs again. The shelter and steepness are favorable when there is shade and moisture.

How pretty amid the downy and cottony fruits of November the heads of the white anemone, raised a couple of feet from the ground on slender stalks, two or three together, — small heads of yellowish-white down, compact and regular as a thimble beneath, but, at this time, diffusive and bursting forth above, somewhat like a little torch with its flame, — a very neat object!

Nov. 25. P. M. — Paddle to Baker Farm.

The weeds of water-plants have decayed and fallen long since, and left the water along the sides of the river comparatively clear. In this clear, cold water I see no fishes now, and it is as empty as the air. But for some days, at least, or since colder weather, I have noticed the snow-fleas skipping on the surface next the shore. These are rather a cool-weather phenomenon. I see them to-day skipping by thousands in the wet clamshells left by the muskrats.¹

¹ Probably washed out by rise of river.

Landing at the ash tree above the railroad, I thought I heard the peculiar note of grackles toward the willow-row across the field, and made a memorandum of it, never doubting; but soon after I saw some farmers at work there, and found that it was the squeaking of the wheel that rolled before their plow. It perfectly resembled the grackle's note, and I never should have suspected it if I had not seen the plowers. It is fit that the creaking of the farmer's plow who is working by the riverside should resemble the note of the blackbirds which frequent those fields.

There is a thin ice for half a rod in width along the shore, which shivers and breaks in the undulations of my boat. Those bayonet rushes still standing are much curved.



See but few ducks, — two of them, — and generally few in the fall compared with the spring.

A large whitish-breasted bird is perched on an oak under Lee's Cliff, for half an hour at least. I think it must be a fish hawk (?).

We hear the clattering sound of two ducks — which rise and fly low at first — before we can see them though quite far off by the side of the pond. Our hands and feet are quite cold, and the water freezes on the paddles, but about sundown it grows sensibly warmer and a little misty. Is not this common at this season?

Nov. 26. P. M. — Walk over the Colburn Farm wood-lot south [of] the road.

I find, sometimes, after I have been lotting off a large wood-lot for auction, that I have been cutting new paths to walk in. I cut lines an inch [*sic*] or two long in arbitrary directions, in and around some dense wood-lot which perhaps is not crossed once a month by any mortal, nor has been for thirty or fifty years, and thus I open to myself new works [*sic*], — enough in a lot of forty acres to occupy me for an afternoon. A forty-acre wood-lot which otherwise would not detain a walker more than half an hour, being thus opened and carved out, will entertain him for half a day.

In this case there was a cultivated field here some thirty years ago, but, the wood being suffered to spring up, from being open and revealed this part of the earth became a covert and concealed place. Excepting an occasional hunter who crossed it maybe once in several months, nobody has walked there, nobody has penetrated its recesses. The walker habitually goes round it, or follows the single cart-path that winds through it. Woods, both the primitive and those which are suffered to spring up in cultivated fields, thus preserve the mystery of nature. How private and sacred a place a grove thus becomes! — merely because its denseness excludes man. It is worth the while to have these thickets on various sides of the town, where the rabbit lurks and the jay builds its nest.

When I ran out the boundary lines of this lot, I could commonly distinguish the line, not merely by the different growth of wood, but often by a kind of ditch which I think may have been produced by the plow, which heaped up the soil along the side of the field when it was

cultivated. I could also detect trees variously bent and twisted, which probably had made part of a hedge fence when young, and others which were scarred by the fencing-stuff that had been fastened to them.

The chickadee is the bird of the wood the most un-failing. When, in a windy, or in any, day, you have penetrated some thick wood like this, you are pretty sure to hear its cheery note therein. At this season it is almost their sole inhabitant.

I see here to-day one brown creeper busily inspecting the pitch pines. It begins at the base, and creeps rapidly upward by starts, adhering close to the bark and shifting a little from side to side often till near the top, then suddenly darts off downward to the base of another tree, where it repeats the same course. This has no black cockade, like the nuthatch.

In the midst of this wood there occur less valuable patches, of an eighth of an acre or more, where there is much grass, and cladonia, shrub oaks, and lichen-covered birches, and a few pitch pines only, — places of a comparatively sterile character, as if the soil had been run out. The birches will have much of the birch fungus on them, and their fallen dead tops strew the ground.

Nov. 27. P. M. — To Colburn Farm wood-lot north of C. Hill.

I traverse this wood-lot back and forth by the lines cut by those who have lotted it off. Thus I scare up the partridges in it. A dozen long lines four rods apart are cut through it. Walking through these, I am pretty sure to scare up what partridges there are in it, and there

are few wood-lots of this size which have not some in them at present.

Come upon a large ant-hill in the midst of the wood, but no ants on it. It has made an open and bare spot in the woods, ten or twelve feet in diameter. Its mound is partly grassed over, as usual, and trees have been prevented from springing up by the labors of the ants beneath. As this wood is about thirty years old, it may prove that the ant-hill is of the same age!

On the 22d the ground was white with snow for a few hours only. Yet, though you saw no more of it generally the latter part of that day, I still see some of it in cold, wet, shaded places, as amid andromeda and cranberry vines.

This wood-lot, especially at the northwest base of the hill, is extensively carpeted with the *Lycopodium complanatum* and also much *dendroideum* and *Chimaphila umbellata*. The former, methinks, abounds especially in shady and rather moist, and I think old, or rather diseased, and *cold* (?), woods. It covers the earth densely, even under the thickest white pine groves, and equally grows under birches. It surprises you as if the trees stood in green grass where you commonly see only withered leaves.

The Greeks and Romans made much of honey because they had no sugar; olive oil also was very important. Our poets (?) still sing of honey, though we have sugar, and oil, though we do not produce and scarcely use it.

The principal flight of geese is said to have been a few days before the 24th. I have seen none.

Nov. 28. P. M. — To E. Hubbard's Wood.

Goodwin tells me that Therien, who lives in a shanty of his own building and alone in Lincoln, uses for a drink only checkerberry-tea. (G. also called it "ivory-leaf.") Is it not singular that probably only one *tea*-drinker in this neighborhood should use for his beverage a plant which grows here? Therien, really drinking his checkerberry-tea from motives of simplicity or economy and saying nothing about it, deserves well of his country. As he does now, we may all do at last.

There is scarcely a wood of sufficient size and density left now for an owl to haunt in, and if I hear one hoot I may be sure where he is.

Goodwin is cutting out a few cords of dead wood in the midst of E. Hubbard's old lot. This has been Hubbard's practice for thirty years or more, and so, it would seem, they are all dead before he gets to them.



Saw Abel Brooks there with a half-bushel basket on his arm. He was picking up chips on his and neighboring lots; had got about two quarts of old and blackened pine chips, and with these was returning home at dusk more than a mile. Such a petty quantity as you would hardly have gone to the end of your yard for, and yet he said that he had got more than two cords of them at home, which he had collected thus and sometimes with a wheelbarrow. He had thus spent an hour or two and walked two or three miles in a cool November evening to pick up two quarts of pine chips scattered through the woods. He evidently takes real satisfaction in collecting his fuel, perhaps gets more heat of all kinds out of it than any man in town. He is not reduced to

taking a walk for exercise as some are. It is one thing to own a wood-lot as he does who perambulates its bounds almost daily, so as to have worn a path about it, and another to own one as many another does who hardly knows where it is. Evidently the quantity of chips in his basket is not essential; it is the chippy idea which he pursues. It is to him an unaccountably pleasing occupation. And no doubt he loves to see his pile grow at home.

Think how variously men spend the same hour in the same village! The lawyer sits talking with his client in the twilight; the trader is weighing sugar and salt; while Abel Brooks is hastening home from the woods with his basket half full of chips. I think I should prefer to be with Brooks. He was literally as smiling as a basket of chips. A basket of chips, therefore, must have been regarded as a singularly pleasing (if not pleased) object.

We make a good deal of the early twilights of these November days, they make so large a part of the afternoon.

Nov. 29. P. M. — To Copan.

There is a white birch on Copan which has many of the common birch fungus of a very peculiar and remarkable form, not flat thus:  but shaped like a bell or short horn, thus:  as if composed of a more flowing material which had settled downward like a drop. As C. said, they were shaped like icicles, especially those short and spreading ones about bridges.

Saw quite a flock of snow buntings not yet very white. They rose from the midst of a stubble-field unexpectedly. The moment they settled after wheeling around, they were perfectly concealed, though quite near, and I could only hear their rippling note from the earth from time to time.

Nov. 30. I am one of a committee of four, viz. Simon Brown (Ex-Lieutenant-Governor), R. W. Emerson, myself, and John Keyes (late High Sheriff), instructed by a meeting of citizens to ask liberty of the selectmen to have the bell of the first parish tolled at the time Captain Brown is being hung, and while we shall be assembled in the town house to express our sympathy with him. I applied to the selectmen yesterday. Their names are George M. Brooks, Barzillai Hudson, and Julius Smith. After various delays they at length answer me to-night that they "are uncertain whether they have any control over the bell, but that, *in any case*, they will not give their consent to have the bell tolled." Beside their private objections, they are influenced by the remarks of a few individuals. Dr. Bartlett tells me that Rockwood Hoar said he "hoped no such foolish thing would be done," and he also named Stedman Buttrick, John Moore, Cheney (and others added Nathan Brooks, senior, and Francis Wheeler) as strongly opposed to it; said that he had heard "five hundred" (!) damn me for it, and that he had no doubt that if it were done some counter-demonstration would be made, such as firing minute-guns. The doctor himself is more excited than anybody, for

he has the minister under his wing. Indeed, a considerable part of Concord are in the condition of Virginia to-day, — afraid of their own shadows.

I see in E. Hubbard's gray oak wood, four rods from the old wall line and two or three rods over the brow of the hill, an apparent downy woodpecker's nest in a dead white oak stub some six feet high. It is made as far as I can see, like that which I have, but looks quite fresh, and I see, by the very numerous fresh white chips of dead wood scattered *over* the recently fallen leaves beneath, that it must have been made since the leaves fell. Could it be a nuthatch or chickadee's work? ¹

This has been a very pleasant month, with quite a number of Indian-summer days, — a pleasanter month than October was. It is quite warm to-day, and as I go home at dusk on the railroad causeway, I hear a hylodes peeping.

¹ [Probably a downy woodpecker's winter quarters.]