

"All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side"

—PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

The Pilgrim

O. P. Kretzmann

Autumn Leaf

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I wonder if anyone has ever been fully prepared for the coming of autumn. Perhaps as little as we are ready for the end of anything in life. July and August meander along in their apparent endlessness, one bright or sullen day after another. There seems to be no change. The crickets grow louder, the dust lies dreaming on the trees and bushes, the thunder comes with every other twilight. Only when I look across the fence into my neighbor's yard and see the apples turn red can I tell that summer is waning and the time of harvest is near. Then, inevitably and suddenly, there comes a morning when everything seems changed. From my window I observe that the maple has a few leaves which are brown. Others are already on the ground. The crickets chirp in a lower key, and a new note of melancholy appears in the whistle of the train down the valley. The leaves begin to fall, at first lazily and alone, but then faster and faster as the wind rises and the travail of change comes over the earth. The order and logic of inevitability are in them as they lie in their seemingly haphazard places. Thoreau knew what their rustling and whispering say to us who walk through our autumn world:

When the leaves fall, the whole earth is a cemetery pleasant to walk in. I love to wander and muse over them in their graves. Here are no lying nor vain epitaphs. What though you own no lot at Mount Auburn? Your lot is surely cast somewhere in this vast cemetery, which has been consecrated from of old. You need attend no auction to secure a place. There is room enough here. The loosestrife shall bloom and the huckleberry-bird sing over your bones. The woodman and hunter shall be your sextons, and the children shall tread upon the borders as much as they will.

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This, then, is the season of the elegy and the mourner. Certainly, however, there are meaning and purpose and knowledge, year after year, in the falling of a leaf from a dying tree. Once more we see the great paradox of life and time: To live well and greatly, our journeying through the world must be a repeated experience of death. We die, as the leaf dies, to the immaturities of childhood to be reborn for the responsibilities of maturity. We die to selfishness to live for others. We die to resentment against life for not giving us everything we desire to the glad acceptance of its hard discipline of sorrow. We die to sin to live to God. We die to the noise of time to live for the whisper of eternity. Surely this is always and forever true: If we have not learned to die we have not learned to live.

This, here and now, on this gray autumn morning I find curiously comforting. More than any other generation for two thousand years, my generation, the firstborn of the twentieth century, has succumbed to the fatal pressure of immediacy. We live in a world of today's headlines, up-to-the-minute broadcasts, this hour's problems. Our catch words are *here, now, today*. The autumn leaf drifting quietly to the earth in its good time tells the whole story of all the names and tears of our dark age. They, too, shall pass away. Their hour is as definite as the hour of the autumn leaf. Nineteen sixty-six will also, very soon now, be a tale that has been told. No, there is nothing new in all this, but it is desperately worth repeating in an hour when we are living only for the hour and looking for the man of the hour and fearing what the next hour may bring.

But there is yet one more thing to be said. The autumn leaf speaks indeed of change and death, but not of immortality. Slowly but surely we move from the hollow in which the leaf rests to the high altitudes of faith. Nothing which I observe either in spring or in autumn tells me anything about the intimations of immortality which lie deep in the human soul and in divine revelation. Between them and the human reason hangs an impenetrable veil. "Eye hath nor seen, nor ear heard." As far as my mind can reach, the end comes when the curtain goes down. Whatever begins when the curtain goes up again lies on the other side of visibility. Beyond the nature of the existence which alone can be the object of scientific and reasonable knowledge, there may be something in the human soul which longs for eternity, but this desire is no proof for it. For that assurance I must turn to Easter. The Christian faith would have died out long ago if a miracle had

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not daily repeated itself—a miracle which remains just as great and incomprehensible as it was 1900 years ago. The miracle is that a human soul in the face of death, loaded down with guilt which it can never make good, finds rest and immortality in an Eternal High Priest who loved the dying world even unto death. This is the one unshakable foundation for our faith in immortality and eternity. The autumn leaf is not homesick for the earth from which it came. We are— and ought to be—because the warm, silent cradle of the grave is the open door to our true home.

