

OCTOBER'S WEALTH

Joan Y. Ryan

October's wealth blows wild with fun,
The leaves and waters flying on ;
Asunder in the midst of warmth
A breeze sweeps dank, yet cool, from some past day of rain.
The wind that bends the bush and tree
Is making fun, for leaves that lift their tops for rain
Bend fuzzy backs to share the sun.

October's wealth is in the sky,
In laden orchards, ripening fields of grain.

White curtains at my windows flutter back into my room
To free my view that I may see
October as I write.

* * * * *

Uncertainty

Fred J. Bennett

A CAR slithered around the corner of the highway and onto the narrow dirt road that cut its tortured course through the woods. For a moment, the sharp bark of the engine was everywhere; then the car was gone.

The few rays of the sun cast pitiful shadows on the bare earth, making it appear more bare through the sparse brown tufts that boasted of a better past. The screech of the blue-jay echoed among the stark trees, stopping the digging of a grey squirrel, already puffed in its winter coat. Here and there the red leaves of the sumac, flashing garishly, seemed to make the wind more biting. The winter birds drew deeper into their nests among the tired green of the fir and the cedar. As the flat grey of evening engulfed the orang drop that was the sun, the quaver of the owl brought silence to the woods. The raccoon curled tighter in its den. The first snow began to fall.

The large flakes fell slowly, carressingly, upon the raw earth, filling the single set of ruts in the mud road. On the little pond, only the lodge of the beaver was free from ice. The owl's hoot was stilled. All the world seemed to slumber. The snow fell more rapidly now, and no sign of man's passing was visible.

In the lee of the cabin, however, could still be seen the irregular pattern of the winter treads, ending at the car itself, now mute under a squat lean-to. Summer furniture still lay about the small veranda, giving an air of desertion to the place. The square panes of the two

windows, yawning empty and black to the frosty night, reflected no light. Then, faintly, a yellow light shone under the door.

The white shirted figure of a man seemed to materialize at one of the windows. He gazed absently at the world of swaying black trees and vague, snowy mounds that lay before him. With a slow shake of the head, he turned back toward the small blaze on the hearth.

Within the cabin the only sound was the gentle snapping of the fire, busily devouring pine faggots. The long tongues of flame leaped high, casting grotesque patterns on the chinked log walls. The hush of night made all activity seem futile.

John Carver leaned the poker against the wall and, resting against the heavy mantel, stood staring down into the crackling flames. The glow reached out, illuminating his dark, lined face with such brilliance as to make it stand alone, disembodied, peering down into his fiery medium. His deep set eyes seemed to watch the elusive figure of a girl that walked their flickering maze. As he watched, some of the lines seemed to relax, and, occasionally, a brief smile would tug at his tightly pressed lips. Turning, Carver pulled up a large, low rocking chair and settled to continue his reverie. His heavy, muscular body appeared to blend into the chair as it began squeaking with each movement.

Funny how a guy could take things so calmly, see everything so clearly . . . and yet all was still confused. Fran was dead. Simple enough to understand, but it was what came after that where the trouble came in. It was what he saw so clearly after that. . . . This it was that confused him. He had tried to hold onto himself, faced their friends, completed the arrangements, until he felt ready to burst. Finally, able to keep under control no longer, he had fled from the city, from people. He had fled from the sickening sweet reality of funeral bouquets to settle with the colder reality of his own mind. Here, amid the snow-smothered forest, he could purify the jumbled, selfish anguish that tore at his brain. Here, where he had had such summers with his wife, John hoped to find his future.

From their first meeting she had been the center of his existence. Now, she would no longer be there, ready to calm his little fears, to help him find that purpose in life that would allow him to push on, take chances. It was Fran who had really added that new wing to the plant, and it would have been fitting for Fran to cut the ribbon at the branch warehouse in Eastwood . . . but she won't be there, ever. Somewhere, somehow, he had to find a rallying place for his suddenly scattered life. It was funny, the way Fran and he had met. Even then, she had played an important part in his life.

He had lain for weeks in Valley Forge Hospital, the break in his leg mending slowly. Then they had given him a wheel chair. In his exuberance at being able to move about the corridors, he had

joined a group of other wheel chair cases in a race along the back terrace.

The only way you could really get speed was to run the thing backward. Those wheels really could go. In the third heat he had been leading the pack around the corner, looked back to give an added shove, when someone screamed and the chair, John, and the owner of the scream ended in a heap on the terrazo.

That was the way he had met Fran. The new cast on his leg took much of the meaning from the order confining him to quarters. He had been resting comfortably when the captain came in "to see what the crazy fool really looked like." She had sailed into the room with all the confidence of a beautiful woman about to berate a clumsy moron. And she had left the room a beautiful woman who had done so. Well, almost that way, except that John wasn't quite the moron he had appeared. Captain Elliott (that was Fran) had almost succeeded, but her piquant little face amid lush brown hair had been her downfall. John had sallied forth, undaunted by starched uniform and glittering silver bars. After the captain's haughty, but prudent withdrawal, Carver felt as though at last life's path had wandered into something worthwhile. He couldn't catalogue his reactions, but no longer would he depend upon wheel chair races for diversion. He had something else, now, he had Fran.

"Yeah, I thought I was all set." John stirred the logs with his foot, then slowly primed his pipe. "I'd never felt quite like this before, but I'd always figure out a way to handle a girl, especially if she was good looking." He pulled a twig from the fire and held the glowing end to his briar, drawing at the flame until the tobacco in the bowl glowed a shimmering scarlet. "Trouble was, Fran was brainy, too."

Fran Elliott had been too intelligent to fall for his woman baiting maneuvers. She had come back, bending over his bed in the empty ward to tell him bits of hospital gossip. Smiling gently, talking in her soft voice, talking, sometimes of things they both knew he had heard, but talking, nonetheless.

Before the accident, before he'd met Fran, he had always had that feeling of restlessness. Nothing really mattered, no real importance could be placed on anything. He had talked to others in the ward and knew that he wasn't alone. Though all of them wanted to be home, after that everything seemed of very little value. Just to get away, that was it. The little Irishman in the corner had put it quite simply, "I don't give a damn if I never see anybody again. I got me a shack in the Odirondacks and I gonna let the cockeyed world go straight to hell!"

Yet, none of them could give a good reason, not one that would stand up in court, anyway. Some blamed the war; others admitted that they didn't know. John was one of those.

You couldn't explain it to everyone. The only guys who seemed to understand were feeling the same way and they couldn't solve it either. Sometimes, when he was alone, he would look out the window, beyond the clusters of berobed patients, way out over the trees to the squat green mountains. On very clear days, he could catch a flash of light as the sun reflected off silvery railroad cars. "That was the one thing that looked the same." When he had been a boy, everything had a reason, even going to school or mowing the lawn. When he thought of this and listened to the newscasts, he just couldn't quite make them fit together. Everybody running like crazy, but what for? There must be something sensible. Maybe it would be best not to worry—simply start out and let each day follow in the prescribed order. Maybe, but John Carver wasn't buying that, yet.

After all, he had always known the way things should go and he had done something to make them do so. Even the war hadn't bothered his plans to enter his father's business. He hadn't liked the idea of the army, but, after graduating from college, he had enlisted and gone to Officers' Candidate School. He had made it and had led a bunch of boys in the 36th Infantry Division.

"Damndest bunch of guys brought together in history, and wars have always mixed some prize packages." John stopped rocking a moment, let his head slip back against the top of the chair. He smiled wryly. "We really had fun," he murmured, then was rocking once more.

Five years made a lot of difference. On his leave he found that he wasn't a part of home life anymore: life had gone past. The idea of business had gone then, and so had all the other dreams and hopes that he had nurtured so carefully. The war made him a philosopher of gunfire, a cynic, a skeptic, and a pretty confused individual.

Fran and he had gone on walks together, strolling the paths of the hospital garden. He had felt increasingly more free. It had been a truly glorious day when Fran borrowed a friend's car and they had driven along the highway "just looking," as Fran had put it. The little park they had chosen overlooked the bay and smelled of the scrub pines that stood in thick clumps about the meadow. The grass had been soft and cool to his touch. They had stretched out under the shadit tree and lain looking out over the waters, speculating on the kinds of people in the boats that dotted its surface.

As he had lain there, his head pillowed, eyes closed, on Fran's shoulder and felt her fingers gently smoothing the tousled brown wisps of hair, he grasped for the first time in years that gentle feeling of lassitude that accompanies complete acceptance. Here, he had thought, here was something for which to work. With the warm fragrance of her body there beside him, the tenderness of her lips, accepting his, all of his fears had gone. The sweetness of her voice soothed him, caressed him, made him whole again. The happy smile

she had raised to him that day tied the ribbon on John Carver, new man.

Later that same evening, at a little roadside restaurant, its candle-lighted terrace overlooking the now deep purple waters of the bay, he had turned to her, almost like a school boy handing in a not-too-good report card, and asked the future-shaping question. The little string ensemble had played soft melodies, and within his trembling brain the Prufrocks had crept to their dens and the rich lyrics of Browning and Shakespeare had emerged, rushing into his thoughts, forming his words, guiding his fumbling tongue. She had accepted with that same quick, happy smile that had been his earlier. It had been a wonderful evening.

"Yeah, it sure was." Carver rocked faster, now, and sucked hard at the dead pipe. Fran had always been there. It was she who soothed his confused thoughts, it was for Fran, the cute little girl on the pedestal that John Carver worked. She had forced him to assume a semblance (appreciably wiser) of his former self. John's electronics firm had succeeded because of the lovely reason that lived at his house. He would come home to the quiet assurance of his wife and never fail to solve his problems. In moments of doubt he would bury his face in her breast and feel, again, the comfort of her hands on his neck and in his hair. He would hear the sweet voice talking to him, leading him as one would a little boy, safely through the forest of his own mind.

His pipe was cold, the fire glowed dully from the remaining cluster of coals, but John didn't notice. "All that's gone. After five years of hell and filth I finally got something that was decent and beautiful and I couldn't keep it. If only she would have stayed home and let me go to the grocery!" He could see the street, the car skidding on the icy pavement, and then a sickening crash. Fran hadn't lasted the night.

"Damn it, Carver, you just can't sit here wishing for the past." John straightened, laid his pipe on the table beside him. Already his old feeling of uncertainty seemed on the brink of return. With an effort, he stood and began feeding fuel into the dying embers.

His haven of rest was gone. There could be no such respite for John Carver again. John paused, one hand groping for a chunk of wood. Maybe, just maybe, he could do it as Fran had always said he could. He could hear that voice now, "Someday, you won't need me for all this; you can do it for yourself." He might be able to do it, alright, but not for himself alone. There was someone who might understand, someday, when he told her about uncertainty, a smiling girl named Fran, and a future. Someday he would tell the story to the tiny baby that was part of Fran, perhaps more than himself. He would work and progress, and one day he would tell his story, and then he would know.