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'Such a change to come to one of these quaint old village inns—so full of local charm...'



H. E. BATES

All the milkiness of May-time

ON AN EARLY SPRING DAY, touched with the very lightest silvery mist, I took a favourite journey of mine. Starting from just under the North Downs in Kent, where the great beeches in a vast wood called the King's Wood (so called because Henry VIII hunted there) magnificently dominate the chalk, I travelled the fifty miles across the wide weald of Kent and Sussex to Brighton, a few miles to the east of which you get your first glimpse of the South Downs, utterly bare and looking, as they did on that tenderly misty day, not at all unlike great grey whales washed up from the sea.

Between these two sharply contrasting ranges of hills there lies a spread of countryside that has, for me, an abiding magic. Unspectacular, marked by no dramatic distinguishing feature such as those of Lakeland, Wales, the Pennines or Scotland, it nevertheless has a great power of evocation. It uplifts; it creates a great sense of space; it is a perfect piece of English man-made pastoral. Woods, pastures, village greens, cornfields, hop-gardens, orchards, strawberry fields, little streams, russet-tiled villages, pin-cushions of pines, roadside hedges and dykes fresh-decked in spring with primroses, anemones and Shakespeare's lovely lady smocks: the whole infinitely varied pattern gives the living lie to that senseless assertion, so often repeated, that our precious countryside is either in decay or is being mercilessly filched from us by the workings of a dubious element called progress. No statement

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causes me greater irritation; far from accepting it even as remotely true I marvel, year after year, at the incomparable heritage that is still ours.

Also in spring, a friend of mine set out on the same pilgrimage (I use the word advisedly because that is how this journey always seems to me), taking with him two visitors from South America. For some time these two people gazed on England's April with speechless enchantment. They drank in the acid brilliance of its many greens like two weary desert travellers coming upon a blessed oasis. The very existence of such greenness was itself a miracle. But presently, in turn, it provoked an amazed question. 'Why,' they wanted to know, 'do you allow the cattle to eat the crops?' When told that the crops were in fact grass they fell back into silence again, more amazed at England than ever.

Much though I dislike 'the moral of the story is' I cannot here resist the temptation to say that I strongly suspect that all too many of those who assert that we are rapidly losing our countryside do not, alas, use their eyes very much. No evidence existed on that silvery spring morning as I crossed the recurring spines of landscape which everywhere afford two-way views of the Weald's lovely undulations, that any part of at least that wide stretch of pastoral was in danger of demise or decay. The full glory of true spring was still some six weeks away (W. H. Hudson said that the English countryside invariably looked at its most superb on or about May the eighteenth—note the date well). The true magic of the green that had so amazed the visitors from South America had not yet begun, but the gold had.

Gold in fact curtained every copse, every wood, every hedge-row: the gold of hazels, the legions of catkins singularly incandescent against the silvery haze, so much so that the trees everywhere appeared to undergo a miracle of enlargement.



One of the ponds at Waggoners Wells, Grayshott, Hampshire, originally made to serve an iron works, a spot much loved of Tennyson.

Derek Widdicombe

Not that all was gold. The mist seemed here and there to condense on leafless branches of willow, the little cushions of their catkins silver too. And most silver of all, the snowdrops, wide companies of them everywhere. And the gold again in the first celandines, fresh-varnished as if with liquid sun.

Beautiful though all this was and is, there is a further stretch of country extending into the downland of West Sussex and Hampshire and on into Wiltshire that is in some ways and at certain seasons perhaps even more beautiful. This is the South Country so marvellously described by Edward Thomas,



Chanctonbury Ring and the South Downs, Sussex, from Devil's Dyke, near Brighton. Leonard and Marjorie Gayton

the same country that inspired Gilbert White to say 'though I have now travelled the Sussex Downs for upwards of thirty years, yet I still investigate that chain of majestic mountains with fresh admiration year by year, and I think I see new beauties each time I traverse it', and caused Hudson himself to speculate, time and time again, what lay behind the mysterious, perennial fascination of the wide spaces, the sea-washed skies and 'the close matting of the turf that covers the sheep-fed downs'.

Over into Wiltshire this majestic sense of space that so captivated our three greatest nature writers becomes perhaps even more impressive. Over and over again you come to a spot from which you can look out, in all directions, on the rolling unsullied landscape that prompts you to ask yourself if man has ever touched it, still less spoilt it. At times, on certain days and in certain lights, there is a sense of something prehistoric

about it all, evoking a great sense of mystery that is also curiously haunting.

Above Chichester, around Goodwood, the downland is altogether richer, the hills no longer sparsely clad, and as I travel them and drink them in I become excusably nostalgic. Over and over again, during the grimmest days of the war, these same hills were a salve and a comfort to me. Whenever I could snatch an hour or two from my Air Force duties I walked about them, restlessly watching for spring to come and then eventually revelling in the full balm of summer. I did not then know that the house we used as our officers' mess, Shopwyke House, was owned by a member of a family named Woods, who was a relative of Gilbert White's by marriage. The garden of that house acted as a salve too and one of its more memorable features was something I had never seen before and have never seen since: a pergola of wisteria, a kind of curtained tunnel, all lacy and gloriously mauve and purple in May. So sharply painted is the memory of it that the thousands of mauve and purple crocuses I see at this moment from my window are not more vivid.

Every year I make a pilgrimage across these stretches of downland too, always marvelling, as I do on my journeyings across the Kent and Sussex Weald, not that these lovely landscapes are being filched from us but that they are virtually changeless, the eternal miracle of them renewed every year, so that when spring again clothes them in its infinite greens, its primroses, its bluebells, its catkins, its newly opened cups of whitebeam leaf that, silver too, shine so like magnolias against the black of the downland yews, and finally the glory of hawthorn, I am reminded of something I wrote about the may-tree many years ago. Of all our trees I think of it as the symbol of the heritage we happily still have.

I called it "the risen cream of all the milkiness of May-time".