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The Turn Of The Year

By H. E. BATES

THE little *crocus laevigatus*, which we planted six weeks ago, are already in bloom, tender clean mauve cornets, sparked with orange. They tremble in the west wind that is heavy with seawarmth, opening full in the mornings at a touch of sun. They will be followed, almost certainly by the time these words are in print, by the more kingly and lovelier *imperati*, fawn and mauve, that every year comes on by Christmas and blooms on until it is smothered in February by the many rivulets of purple and white and yellow of all the species we grow.

We saw the first crocus of the autumn in Majorca, in mid-October, in the hills about Valledemossa. They were deep pure yellow, very brilliant, and startling, under the shade of small trees of lemon and tangerine. It was very hot and all about the valleys the thousands of almond trees were already leafless and the young fruits of the tangerines were dark and small and crinkled on the trees where the crocus grew. Everywhere there were fantastic and contorted olives, old trees bright grey against the rusky earth and then soft green-silver against the vivid and amazing sky. They were especially lovely above the little coves by the sea. There the land rises steeply from the rocks, and red-twigged bare almonds are laced among the great drunken olives falling about the slopes, backed by the intense moss-green of tufted pines and the blue wine-bright water.

Going out of a shadowy September England into those hot valleys, climbing up through cream-white villages fiery with bougainvillea and pale blue hedges of plumbago flanking gardens of blistered corn, was like going back into fantastic summer. The dates were golden and small on the palms. Most of the vines were bare of fruit and already the olives were gathered. The season, they said, was over. Only a few respectable, solid, very well-behaved Spaniards, munching at mid-morning on three-inch sandwiches concealing a smear of pimento and garlic about the size of a fig, accompanied us about the hot gardens and through the tiny monastic rooms where Chopin lived in forbidding paradise with the formidable Georges Sand.

Tangerine and Crocus

At midday we ate by the sea. The hot white streets of houses were shuttered by jalousies of striped pink and green, and the meal went on until three or four o'clock under an arbour of dried pine branches, out of the sun. Then in the cooling afternoon there were more gardens. We walked about terraces of old stone, listening to the light fall of water dribbling down through irrigation channels under lemon trees.

Then, lower down, where there was no longer any sun, we saw the crocuses, flaming yellow, very beautiful on the dark dry earth. I picked a few leaves of tangerine as I stood watching them, smelling the scent of them while I crushed them in my hands. And in a moment the bright crocus and the sweet aromatic leaves, each so lovely in the darkening garden, seemed to come together.

It was very un-English, and I could not believe that in England frost might already have blackened the dahlias or that cherry-leaves were already burning and falling on wet bush grass. The smell of tangerines lingered in the air. The crocus faded, and across the Mediterranean, southward, the sunset was splendid with deeper combinations of the yellow and orange of the fruit and the flower.

Now, in England, at what columnists usually begin by calling the dying year, the two things come together again. In the house, stronger even than the smell of burning oak, the scent of tangerines; outside, among the rocks that have in the damp winter air exactly the fiery brilliant green of the Majorcan summer pines, the first crocus. The air is full of dark warmth coming in from the sea. The grass is acid green after rain. The parrot-green buds of forsythia are beginning to open on the house wall and on windless days the bright red twigs of lime and hawthorn are motionless and hold a million drops of white water.

Thrushes sing in the half-light, morning and evening, and as I stand and look at the delicate fiery heart of the little crocus and then up at the bare branches of my only almond tree there is a wonderful feeling of mystery in the air. A few spared geese cry across the quiet fields, and the year has turned.