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# The Year's at the Spring

By H. E. BATES

THE first tulips—*Pulchella Violet Queen*—were out on January 18: crimped rose-buds of sharp pink on thin leaves of sepia and green. They were so short, flowering immediately they were clear of earth, that their brightness was almost artificial among the green rocks.

By the end of the month they were surrounded by exquisite things. There were a dozen species of crocus in bloom. The days were blue and clear and of superb tenderness, and on January 29, a day never to be forgotten for sunlight that was like honey, the first iris, *Danfordiae*, was in flower. It is like a little three-throated orchid of brightest lemon yellow, spotted down the throats with the merest speckling of black, like a thrush's egg. It has that wild daffodil sharpness, shot with green like a half-ripened lemon, that is really as fresh as winter air.

Throughout January there had been no touch of winter. Crocus that had begun to bloom in December were still splendid, no longer like torches, but like wide pure stars of pale violet, by the month's end. *Susianus* had appeared a month early. Striped with gold and chocolate, it has something of the look of an Elizabethan doublet; so dark in the bud, so like the colour of winter earth, it is hard to see until sunlight splits the petals. It comes a fraction earlier than *Etruscus*, a very rich and queenly thing in clearest violet that will go on till March. With it came *Tomasinianus*, fragile and free and delicate, naked and almost leafless, and then *Vernus*, so delightful, in its blue and french grey, that it is almost as fine as *Imperati*, the loveliest of all.

The last six days of January were like a golden dream. In a winter never matched for loveliness of light or for the entrancing effect that everything, from grass to sky, was in some extraordinary way wonderfully alive and not dead, these days were miraculous in their openness and warmth and light. Doves were cooing at seven o'clock in the morning with that absent-minded drowsiness that is like the note of pure summer, and a whole choir of skylarks was continuously up in the bright wind. A pair of robins began prancing and dancing at each other, tails flaunted. The dark sea-heaviness of December had gone. Everything seemed lifted up by bird-song and light.

At the very end of the month the first anemones appeared, the little Grecian multi-coloured *Blanda*, blue and grey and pink and white, like lacy closed stars under the rocks. A few narcissus had buds lifted like beaks, well above their leaves. The woods had given primroses continuously since Christmas, and now there were aconites everywhere. And in the woods the young birches were smouldering clouds of deep rose-brown where they lay in sunlight against backgrounds of taller, darker branches.

As I write this out of doors, blackbirds are courting in a cherry tree and chaffinches are already feeding, as they always do, on the far too forward buds of prunus, bright as seed rubies all over the tree. The country Jeremiahs have had a long run, with their grizzling warnings of many berries foretelling a hard winter, and then their continual "We shall have to suffer for it." They never seem to grasp the moments of pure pleasure, and let the rest go hang.