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COUNTRY LIFE

Early Cubs

Sir William Beach Thomas's recent note on March cubs and his reference to *The Times* report of the Oakley hunt having been interrupted by the appearance of a vixen and her cubs recall for me a delightful experience in the Oakley country five years ago, when on a very early April day I came upon a group of fox-cubs playing like kittens in the edge of a pool in a primrose wood. It was soft weather, with a little wind, and the light fur of the cubs, ruffled and rosetted like feathers, was almost golden in the sunshine. I counted thirteen cubs. And with the wind blowing towards me I sat and watched them appear and disappear and reappear from among the tree-roots and primrose tufts without ever alarming them. They must have then been some weeks old and the spring was normal. They were also the first cubs I had ever seen; and the sight of them playing softly by the waterside among thousands of full-blown primroses and dark bluebell buds and many oxlips was an unforgettable delight. The fox in fact is an early love-maker; so that March cubs, contrary to the fox-hunters' notion that they do not appear until May, are quite normal.

* * * *

Flowers and Birds

Flowers and birds give me more pleasure than all other wild things. Yet as I sit here in the spring sunshine, at a time when I ought to be enjoying the rewards of much autumn horticultural sweat, I am nursing for the first time a feeling of hatred against the birds. For the sparrows are ripping my polyanthus buds to yellow and crimson shreds. I am more angry because I not only imagined that my flowers, after being unattacked for four years, were immune, but because I imagined I knew why they were immune. I put down that immunity to the fact that I never feed birds except in bitter weather, reasoning first that a wild bird ought to find its food without the aid of man and secondly that a pampered bird, like a pampered child, is more likely to be treacherous than grateful. Acting on those suppositions, I have never lost a single polyanthus in four years. True, I lost during the same time a patch of *crocus Susianus*, the flowers of which are yellow and chocolate, though I never lost a hybrid crocus, of whatever colour, nor a single blossom of *crocus Sieberi*, which grew in a patch of mauve three inches away from the *Susianus*. Whereas this year, with the earth soft and bird-food plentiful throughout all the winter months, I lose a thousand polyanthus buds, but no crocus. And of all the countless wild primroses that have bloomed in increasing numbers since Christmas day I have never seen a single one molested. This is an old question. What I want, however, is not an answer but a remedy. Pepper, says a friend. So I am trying pepper. All I can say as to its efficacy at the moment is that peppered primrose seems to be as delicious in the mouths of birds as oysters on the tongues of epicures.

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New Potatoes

More than 30,000,000 acres of potatoes are grown in the world, and of that number more than half are grown in Russia. This is one of many extremely interesting facts taken from a paper by J. M. Bukasov, some extracts from which are included in the current number of *The Countryman* by courtesy of Sir Rowland Biffen, Emeritus Professor of Botany at Cambridge University. This admirable article tells how the Russians—who never of course do anything to justify their existence on the earth's surface—sent M. Bukasov to Guatemala, Mexico and Colombia to investigate the possibility of acquiring new species—not varieties—of potato. Further expeditions were sent to Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Ecuador. The results were astounding. M. Bukasov himself collected over 5,000 specimens, and potatoes were discovered growing at extreme elevations over a total latitude of 60 degrees. Species were found in tropical valleys and others at exposed and frost-bound altitudes. The rainfall in all the native potato fields varied extremely and everywhere different species had been cultivated for centuries. Yet for nearly four hundred years the potato had been presumed to be a single species! The results of the Russians' expeditions and their subsequent investigations in hybridization are of incalculable value. The production of frost-resistant commercial varieties is for instance already a certainty, and various frost-resistant hybrids have been evolved which produce a high yield of good-quality potatoes. The Russians' enterprise indeed has so impressed the world that the German Breeding Institute, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Soalöf Institute in Sweden, have all been potato-hunting in Soviet footsteps.

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In exposed Midland districts there is an unwritten law that to plant potatoes before April 18th is to fly in the face of the Almighty. Being Midland born I therefore kept secret the heresy of planting five rows of Epicure in Kent on March 7th. These potatoes, however, in spite of the bitterest spell of the whole winter on and about March 9th, made astonishing and in my experience record progress. They were through the ground in just under three weeks, actually on March 20th. While this was no doubt largely due to their being planted under an eight-feet south wall, it was also the result of careful seed-nursing during the autumn and winter. Small seed was selected in August, then sun-dried until almost black, and sprouted in boxes in a mild room during winter. The chits at the time of planting varied from one to two inches and were as thick as the little finger and a purple cabbage colour. The importance of sprouting is not always realized; but it has been authoritatively stated that the yield per acre from sprouted potatoes is as much as two tons above that of unsprouted. But the point of these remarks is not so much to retail agricultural advice as to say that I hope this year to emulate the feat of a certain devilishly cunning and now famous relative, who up to the age of 90 regularly raised two crops of potatoes each year on the same piece of land.

* * * *

Jubilee Commemoration

Having no use for jubilees, and still less for banners, I regarded with a little scorn the invitation of my own parish council to attend a meeting called " in order to discuss the most appropriate way of celebrating," &c., &c. But later I received a second invitation, and at the same time a report of some proposals to commemorate May 6th not by waving flags or letting off Roman candles, but by taking over certain areas of common land, hitherto grossly neglected, in order to put them in order and preserve them decently for the future. This changed my attitude, since I believe that the only sensible way of celebrating is by commemoration and, if possible, by the preservation or establishment of natural beauties. I have since discovered that the Council for the Preservation of Rural England is advocating these same methods of commemoration. Encouraged by recent experiments and work in Derbyshire, the Council is now also taking steps to appoint Countryside Wardens, voluntary workers whose business it will be to endeavour to preserve the amenities of the countryside not only for those who visit it once a week or once a year, but for those who happen to live in it. A booklet on the subject has been issued, so that all who are more interested in trees and fields than in banners and fireworks and who are anxious to preserve their countryside from the adventures of so-called " country-lovers," would do well to write to the Secretary for a copy.

* * * *

Blackthorn Winter

The blackthorn winter of country superstition, the sudden bitter April spell of weather that comes every year as surely as the primrose and the cuckoo, occurred this year on April 2nd. The wind was strong and like ice, and the sky changing from black to white and icy blue and the bitter sleet to hot sunshine in a moment or two. And the blackthorn was in blossom, like stars of ice itself on the still wintry black branches. And old countrymen, muffled up, with shining dew-drops, took on the air of prophets. The blackthorn was out: therefore the bitter spell. For them the little cold snowy stars of blossom were more than symbolic; they were the cause of that sudden wintriness. And in May the air of prophecy will be resumed. For every fog in March, a frost in May. And all through the summer the little bouts of prophecy and superstition will go on. The wind will dry the newly turned earth very quickly, quite white, and there will be rain about. The swallows are flying low: rain again. And the cuckoo is already here to perform that mysterious rite of his, the picking up of dirt.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

A Blackbird Triangle

All through the winter three blackbirds have played an odd game of courtship in and about my garden. I used to disturb them in the green lupin trees in December, under the wall, where there was shelter; and from the lupins the hen would rise silently up and land on the wall, tail up, like a fan, in invitation. She was a dull colour, like a rusty black jacket. Then as she sat there, in suspense, the first cock would squawk up from the green branches in a silly rush of ardour for her, almost knocking her over the wall, and she would swoop off in a moment, with the cock after her. And then half a minute after they had gone, or even disappeared, the second cock would flutter from the lupin too, silently and rather heavily, without agitation. And there he would sit for a minute, looking across the wintry garden, a sort of bird Charlie Chaplin, a little comic in his droll meditation. Then he would be off: a slow but determined kind of flight, without squawks or ardent swoops.

The hen and the first cock would have reached the hedge or the rock garden and the flutterings and pursuits of courtship would have begun by the time the second cock arrived. And in a minute the hen would be off again, back to the tree-lupins or over into the field, with the first cock madly after her. For a minutes the second cock would rest and watch, always the Charlie Chaplin, just too late. Then he would be after them again; and sometimes, after some more ardent bit of preoccupation on their part, he would catch up with them and play gooseberry for a minute, until they moved again. They were often on the steps of the rock-garden, and whenever the hen hopped up the steps the first cock followed her, and then after an interval the second cock. Then she came down, and the first cock came down; then after a minute the gooseberry. And so for hours she would lead them a dance up and down the steps and over the carpets of phlox and saxifrage, until she tired of it and flew away, with the first cock in terrific pursuit and the second silently but infallibly behind. As the spring came on and there were more and more birds and flowers to see, I tired a little of watching them. But in April there was a blackbird's nest with three eggs in the hedge, and I saw the hen in the early morning perched on the wall above the lupin trees, tail fanned up, the same rusty colour, as she came off to feed. And I saw the cock feeding on the lawn; but which one he was I could not for the life of me tell.

* * * *

The Symbolic Onion

To thousands of gardeners, small-holders and allotment holders in this country the onion is the symbol of spring. The preparation of that smooth bed on bright March days, the light raking over and over of the frost-powdered soil, the dribbling of the black seed in the shallow drills, make up one of the first and most satisfying of gardening pleasures. It ought to be a proverb that when the onions are in, winter flies over the hedgerow. And it is astonishing to discover that, in spite of this intense onion-sowing and the annual production up and down the country of onions like balloons, we produce only five per cent. of our onion requirements. Imports of Spanish, Dutch and Egyptian onions make up the rest. The truth is that whereas for the small gardener and allotment holder it would be almost sacrilegious not to grow onions, the farmer for some reason neglects them. Fields of onions are far rarer than fields of flax or maize. And now the Government, stirred also perhaps by the symbolism of the onion, is considering an increase on the duty of imported onions in order to encourage home production. So that we may yet have the pleasure of seeing members of the House no longer displaying herrings in order to reinforce their arguments, but supping off that traditional and favourite rural combination, bread and cheese, beer, and spring onions, and so affording the Government, the opposition, die-hards and back-benchers alike with the unusual experience of seeing each other shed their first spontaneous, even if not genuine, political tears.

* * * *

Rare Tulips

For every score of rock-gardeners who struggle with difficult rarities which die unflowered or flower as dowdily as dead-nettles, only one seems to pay any attention to the glorious and accommodating race of tulip species. These natives of Asia Minor and Turkestan and the South Russian steppes are quite distinct from the hybrids of gardens, the Darwins and Cottages and Bizarres, but for the most part quite as easy in cultivation. And one of the easiest and cheapest (*T. Kaufmanniana*) has the virtue of being the earliest tulip to flower, a most delicate thing of soft yellow and pink which opens out flat and wide in the March sun like a primrose water-lily, and all without any coaxings from cloches or warm walls or forward springs. It flowers on into April, and is followed almost immediately by *T. Clusiana*, a tall, extremely tender and delicate tulip of pink and bluish-white, the colours in stripes and the heart of the tulip a rich violet; and then by *T. Eichleri*, a most brilliant Georgian tulip, passionate scarlet, with a black heart and fine silver-green leaves, a gorgeous sight. All these are reasonable to buy and as easy as Darwins to grow. But Farrer speaks of thirty other species, and a distinguished but moderate-priced catalogue of a well-known alpine specialist offers thirty-five, most of them brilliant creatures of a scarlet shade never found in hybrids, and one, *T. Persica*, orange and bronze, *T. Turkestanica*, white, *T. Stellata*, a kind of yellow Clusiana from the Himalayas, *T. Violacea*, true violet, and *T. Pulchella*, which obliges not only by flowering from mid-March for a month but by having flowers of pink or lilac or white or carmine with basal blotches of black or yellow or blue.

* * * *

Potato Frauds

Like the sweet pea, the potato has for many years suffered from being the object of over-zealous hybridizers, with the inevitable result that many varieties, sold under new names at new prices, are in reality synonymous with older kinds. This state of confusion has also given the unscrupulous dealer a chance of gulling a public that cannot reasonably be expected to know that British Queen is identical with English Beauty, Great Scot with Dreadnought, Up to Date with Factor, and who in consequence often pays stiff prices for fancy names. The practice of cataloguing old stocks under new names and of introducing old varieties as perfectly new hybrids is despicable but unfortunately quite common. The existence of the Potato Synonym Committee has however been responsible during the last year for a revolution in the introduction of new varieties, for whereas twenty-five years ago as many as 75 per cent. of new varieties entered for trial at the Ormskirk station were in fact merely old stocks, in 1934 not a single entry proved to be false. The practice of deliberately false cataloguing however still goes on; and since to the inexperienced eye one potato is very like another, it seems likely to continue. Whether the committee issues a list of synonymous varieties in addition to its reports I do not know, but they would earn the gratitude of all potato-growers if they could make such a list freely available.

* * * *

A Fine Plant

A plant which blooms continually for six months and is beautiful both in seed and in flower is something for which every gardener searches. *Verbena venosa* does all this. It makes a modest and graceful bush covered with moderate purple flowers rather like those of *Salvia virgata nemorosa*, the seed husks having the same papery stiffness as those of the salvia, but duller in colour. A plant raised from seed sown in March will begin to bloom in July or even June, and then go on to November or December without ever fading or looking dowdy, like a little bush of perpetual lavender. And planted with *Gazania splendens* it is not only charming but striking, the flat orange and black daisies and the silver gazania leaves contrasting beautifully with the mauve and mouse-colour of the verbena flowers and seeds. Both plants are doubtfully hardy except on the sea-coast, but propagation by cuttings and seed is child's play. *Verbena venosa lilacina* has now also appeared, and some seductive hybrid gazanias in tangerine and moon-colour and yellow and rose. These hybrids are reasonably priced, but the latest addition to the gazania family can only be the pet of millionaires. It is a delicate thing in violet and cream, has been named and raised and offered in honour of the Jubilee, and is moderately priced at 175s. per plant. The faith of nurserymen is wonderful.

H. E. Bates.

COUNTRY LIFE

The Perfect Time

W. H. Hudson once said that the English countryside reached the height of its beauty on or about May 18th. It was a remark based upon years of observation, and anyone who looks at the country somewhere about the time these notes appear may confirm it for himself. However forward or cold the earlier spring has been, the balance of the year seems to adjust itself somewhere about that time. It reaches a perfection of richness and freshness that it never attains again. The oaks alone, in flower with light tassels of greenish yellow, are most glorious; the young beech-leaves, almost transparent, are wonderfully tender and brilliant in the sun; the may itself lies on the hedges in thick clouds of cream. The lilac and the chestnut are in bloom and the bird season reaches its height. The display of passion is intense. The cuckoo is not yet monotonous and the nightingale and the blackbird are perfect. The sleepy and in some way melancholy silence of full summer has not begun. In gardens there is a perfect union between spring and summer, so that roses and tulips bloom together, and pinks and primroses. And in the fields there is a glory of moon-daisy and campion and totter-grass and clover that never comes again, and everywhere one's feet are dusted with gold.

* * * *

Commemorative Trees

Since my recent note on Jubilee commemorations I have had an opportunity of seeing the contribution to this subject by the Council for the Preservation of Rural England. This is a ten-page pamphlet by Mr. W. Dallimore, Keeper of the Museums at Kew, with some practical notes by Mr. A. D. C. Le Sueur, the well-known authority on trees, of the Royal English Forestry Society. It is an admirable little work, succinct and well-informed, with brief descriptions of scores of trees, both native and foreign, and indications as to the soil and situations which suit each of them. There need be no lack of imagination in the selection of trees. All the larger well-known trees, except the elm, which is not recommended, will be planted as a matter of course. It is the medium trees which may be overlooked : the Chinese maples, which colour splendidly in autumn ; the Juneberry, which bears white blossom in spring and also colours in autumn ; the Indian Bean, a species of Catalpa, with immense heart-shape leaves and white tubular flowers with basal markings of yellow and purple ; the Judas tree, of legendary associations, bearing pink pea-shaped flowers in May ; the cucumber tree, with large and handsome leaves and shapely growth ; and that charming tree, for some reason out of fashion now, the mulberry, which will live for two hundred years and even longer. And lastly, is it heretical to suggest that two Irish trees, the Irish yew and the Irish juniper, should be planted wherever evergreens are required ? Both are dignified columnar trees, one blackish blue and the other bluish, and are far shapelier and livelier in every way than their English counterparts.

* * * *

Wild Azaleas

At the end of May, in certain south-country woods whose names and localities I have conveniently forgotten, it is possible to see trees of yellow azalea growing wild and with great splendour. Neither Moore nor Step makes any reference to this species, which I can only presume to be *A. flava*, wind-blown from neighbouring gardens or planted by some unconventional and long-since forgotten landowner. Only there is no doubt as to its wildness now ; for the bushes, unlike the azaleas of flower shops, grow with glorious vigour to a height of 10 and 20 and even 30 feet. And in these already leaf-shadowy woods, and in the evenings especially, the rich yellow blossoms among the tender green leaves have a half tropical luxuriance, the flowers lily-shaped and the scent extraordinarily soft and sweet, so that the wild magenta rhododendron of the same district seems by comparison as attractive as a dead-nettle in a cowslip field.

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The Eccentric Thrush

The robin, with its passion for building in kettles, gate-posts, the pockets of ancient smocks, letter boxes, and such odd places, has generally been considered the most eccentric of common nesters. But more and closer observation, especially this year, is beginning to convince me that the thrush is a far more amusing and irresponsible builder. Within a radius of two fields from my own house I have discovered thrushes building in situations which make the robins' kettle seem altogether tame and prosaic. In my own garden a thrush has built on a precarious ledge inside the trunk of a willow tree, on bark and fibre that crumbles at a touch ; in the lane another has nested in a stack of hurdles and another in a mud bank, virtually on the ground ; lower down the lane, and over in a field, stands a forgotten muck-fork, and a thrush has eggs in the cup-shape of the handle ; lower still there is one blue egg in a nest that sits in a bucket as though it had been set there by hand ; and across the fields again, in a disused Ford, still another thrush has built on the crest of the flat back tyre, under the mud-guard. The thrush and the robin, however, have one notable characteristic in common : as nesters they are both extremely courageous. They sit with fearless immobility. They return one's stare with a bold brightness of eye that is wonderfully fascinating. They have none of the excited squawking of the blackbird or the mad volatility of the starling.

* * * *

Flower Shows

The local flower-show, that institution so much loved by villagers, working-men's clubs and sentimental novelists, is about to begin its usual summer season. I wish it were possible to prophesy that it would not be characterized by the usual atrocious dahlias and vegetable marrows and still more by the usual dishonesty and humbug. But the facts of a long tradition are against me. In addition to the frilling and grooming of asters and sweet-peas as though they were pet pups, there will be the usual practice, long since winked at, of exhibiting as own-grown produce and flowers bought from work-mates and neighbours. And the humbug and stupidity of committees will, I fear, be as much in evidence as ever—as in the case of a head-gardener of my acquaintance who, after spending a day in judging and making awards, was astounded to find that the prize cards had been changed about ; and was told, on protesting, that he had committed the unpardonable error of not awarding prizes to Mrs. A. and Mr. B and Miss X, who were all long and untiring workers on the committee.

* * * *

Flowering Crops

In England there are no acres of autumn crocus or narcissus or salvia, but the colour and scent of cultivated crops is an altogether enchanting thing. The fields of mustard shine like lemon paint against the dark but rich acres of unripened corn, the sweet clover fields are soft cream and strawberry at the height of summer. The flowers of sainfoin and lucerne are softer than their names. The potato flowers are like little candlesticks of mauve and white, with stiff flames of orange. In August the oats are like pink reeds. But loveliest of all are the fields of flax and bean. The War may have seen the establishment in popularity of the poppy, but it saw also the establishment of the blue flax in English fields to an extent which has never since been equalled. The flowers of the flax are like light blue silk. And in open fields they are constantly caught up and shaken and rippled by the wind until the sight of them is lovelier even than the sight of shimmering water. Today, in England, the flax is rare in cultivation, but the field-bean is not only the most beautiful but the most common of English flowering crops. The flowers against the grey leaves are almost insignificant : little monkshoods of dull lilac and white, but the scent is a glory unequalled by any other flower of the open countryside, transcending even the honeysuckle and the wild rose and having the virtue of travelling as far as the fragrance of hay.

* * * *

Postscript

As I correct these notes for the printer I find that the wren has outnested both the robin and the thrush. In the same disused Ford where the thrush has built on the back tyre a wren has laid in the radiator. The cap has gone and the eggs are just visible on the soft grey horsehair inside.

H. E. Bates.

[*Sir William Beach Thomas will resume his articles next week.*]

COUNTRY LIFE

December Blessings

December is a month of cheating and envy; and in case that should sound like the statement of a misanthrope I must add that I mean only that one begins to cheat oneself and to envy the gardens richer than one's own. It is an old game to tour the garden in the dark days and count one's blessings in terms of spring, to bend down the hazel boughs and make believe that the catkins are already softening and loosening—as in fact they are—and to catch the sallow buds against a background of cypress or yew or rain cloud and believe that the purses of the buds are bursting and showing an edge of silver—as in fact they already do. It is a process of cheating that exhilarates and delights. It may be played indefinitely. So at the moment, as I write, though the autumn has been wild and bitterly unkind and in no way at all comparable with the milky winter of 1931, when bluebells were six inches above ground in January, it requires only a breath of cheating to make the deuces of December seem like April aces. Already the primroses are out, the blue most precocious, and odd stars of aubretia; daffodils are up, with Tulip Turkestanica and T. Korelkowi showing brownish shoots by the *Daphne Cneorum* buds, hard olive little buttons that are a long, long way from bursting. *Daphne Mezereum* is out, and above it, on the bleak heights of the pergola, many roses. *Viburnum Fragrans* is in bud, and ought to be out by Christmas. The list goes on. My own is quite modest, and not the less precious for that. The rich, the fortunate and the expert will point to yellow forests of witch hazel, mauve acres of iris stylosa. I envy them, but not more than I envy the owners of old camellias, those exotic and now for some reason neglected evergreens—perhaps their vogue passed out with that of Dumas *fils*—with their dark brilliant leaves and December buds and pink and white February blossoms of Southern, almost unworldly loveliness.

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A Derelict Field

Sir William Beach Thomas' recent note on a derelict field must have aroused in many readers, as it did in me, melancholy memories of once rich fields grown desolate. I recall a space—hardly a field—of a thousand acres, unfenced, growing the richest wheat in its neighbourhood, the stacks standing on it like a golden hamlet, that never grew an ear for seven or eight years immediately before the introduction of the quota. And another, good land too, that for ten years has reared increasingly fat crops of wild garlic. The estimated number of derelict acres in these islands, indeed, goes into tragic and dizzy figures. But very rarely it happens that a derelict field is also beautiful: a scarlet sowing of poppies, an accidental scattering of charlock. And at least one field, last summer, shone for weeks as though with the lightest fall of snow: fifteen acres of common daisies without a blemish of earth or grass, a vast lawn of white. "God knows," said the proprietor of the appropriate petrol station that stood in one corner, opposite the devastated and once most beautiful fox-covert, "God knows what it will be like next year." Two dry summers had scattered a million seeds. I shall look forward to the effect of a third. For on the assumption that spring has come when one can tread on three daisies at one time, this will be a field of a billion springtimes.

* * * *

Raspberry Researches

The East Malling Research Station has this year completed twenty-one years of existence—though existence is scarcely an adequate word to describe the activities of this highly specialised and admirable department. There used to be a fallacious assumption that because a tree was large it took care of itself, that the more branches it put forth the healthier it was and the more fruit it bore. I fancy there was still another—based on the classic remark about the strawberry—that because an apple was the work of God doubtless God couldn't have improved on it. Alas for the work of the Almighty as compared with the work of man at East Malling. When research work in small fruits was begun there twenty years ago, Nature had, for instance, got the raspberry and the blackcurrant into, as they say, a proper mess. These hitherto easy and complaintless fruits were sick. It was not only impossible to tell one stock from another, but it was also hard to be certain that commercial varieties fruited authentically or even at all. Like the potato, the raspberry in particular suffered much from careless and unscrupulous growers, so much so that East Malling discovered no fewer than eight distinct varieties masquerading as Baumforth's Seedlings. East Malling, among other things, has changed all that. The raspberry still suffers, however, from an inconceivable variety of Nature's own pet pests—notably the raspberry beetle—against which the Newton Rigg Agricultural Schools for Cumberland and Westmorland have been conducting a spray attack of (i) Barium silicofluoride wash; (ii) derris wash; (iii) nicotine wash, spraying being done in mid-June or earlier, according to the time of opening of the flower buds. Nicotine proved least, and derris in liquid form most effective.

* * * *

Country Dishes

Since the poets, like so many epicurean mice, have been among the cheeses, I have been recalling some country dishes which are still the portion of those who, for one reason and another—but generally the same reason—cannot have their Wensleydale and Camembert. I do not recommend these dishes to societies devoted to the resuscitation or preservation of old English dishes, and it would be almost heretical to disturb the columns of *The Times* with, for instance, a dissertation on the Bedfordshire Clanger. This is a dish which should, and does, endure. It is made to endure. I am always astonished, however, that it does not kill. Composed of a solid shell of dough which conceals nothing but an onion—very occasionally with a morsel of meat—it is a weapon rather than an example of culinary art. Eaten cold, it resembles a kind of gastronomical bomb. For all that, it deserves homage: many acres of the Bedfordshire flatlands must have been mown and hoed and ploughed under the impetus of its dynamic combination of dough and onion, just as many meadows in the Nen valley, only a little farther north, must have been mown under the influence of the locally classic hock-and-dough. The pig indeed provides some sterling if unfashionable dishes, a pig-killing being still as great and bloody and profitable an event in the country as it was in the days of *Jude the Obscure*. Even so, I hardly think that the Café Royal provides chitterlings, or Frascati's faggots; and I should be surprised to hear that the children of even penurious poets know the delights of that frugal dish which is as much the privilege and delight of the children of the country poor as the fox-brush is of the county rich. I mean that succulent, delicate morsel, the pig's tail.

* * * *

The Modest Bird-Lover

It has often seemed to me that there must be many thousands of bird-lovers, principally perhaps townspeople, who never see a rare bird from one year's end to another, and to whom talk of falcons and Montagu's Harriers and bitterns means less even than talk of parroquets and vultures and sword-fish. Few people — fewer than commonly imagined I think—specialise in birds, and fewer still can find the precious time and even more precious courage to explore in winter the eastern marshes and farthest northern moors which our rarest birds inhabit. For them the heron is an uncommon bird and the uprising of a bevy of many hundreds of wild duck from flood waters a specially beautiful and unforgettable sight. To such bird-lovers the floods of the autumn will have been a source of great pleasure. For nothing turns a homely civilised valley into a wild place quicker or more completely than a vast acreage of water, and nothing in turn seems to attract birds in flocks so readily as a valley in flood. And when gulls and peewits intermingle in great flocks of white and black on the waters and on the grass islands and promontories, and when swans skein up and fly over with that strange forlorn cry of fretfulness, the modest bird-lover gets his thrill exactly as the specialist gets his. And I must confess that I am with him. In his world the heron flapping sombrely in the north December wind is a rare and splendid sight, and the sudden fierce cry of wild geese trumpeting across the snow the wildest bird-sound he knows.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

Wooding

Wooding, the cutting of ash or hazel or most often sweet-chestnut copses, begins soon after Christmas in the south, and goes on all through the late winter until spring, the copses often thick with primroses long before the last pole is carried. Spanish chestnut is grown thickly, matures rapidly, springs up with lush vigour after each cutting, and like willow seems indestructible. It rises straight up, beautifully leafed, the leaves long and shining and toothed, the bark in winter smooth as beech and much the same colour, but a little darker, a kind of plum grey, a lovely intermediate colour seen often in pigeons' feathers. The wood itself is white; the cut stools shine up clean against the wintry backgrounds. The standing timber is sold in cants: cant evidently from *canto*, a corner, an edge. The copses certainly often stand like that, on field corners, triangular, or in strips on the road edge, though this may be the result merely of convenient planting. It occurs to one that the word cant may be local, and again that it may not be a specific measurement. The average rotation for chestnut is sixteen years, but is very often less. The first cut is thin, the wood cleaving poorly, the second better, the third good, yielding 16 or even 20 foot hop-poles, good cleaving wood for fences, and in addition faggots, pea boughs, bean sticks, withes, thatching wood. The work of cutting, in its various stages, done in the winter sunshine or during bad weather in the little bark-roofed hovels that a woodman erects for himself, looks, like so many country occupations, a leisurely, charming task, the standing trees throwing long, soft shadows, the smoke of the burning chestnut chippings very blue and aromatic, the primroses responding beautifully to the sudden inlet of light. It is, I need hardly say, the work of an expert. Chestnut needs great care and, incidentally, pays very well for it too.

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Burning Woods

Sweet chestnut has many virtues, but it ranks among average woods as firewood. It burns moderately. It can never rival the fierceness and steadiness of oak and beech or the candle-whiteness of ash. It is fascinating to burn uncommon woods. A townsman orders logs by the sack or the hundredweight, and logs may mean anything from trashy elm to railway sleepers. The countryman buys by the cord, which means four-foot lengths, and cross-cuts it. From a good estate or mixed wood he may get six or seven varieties. Of common woods oak and beech and ash are kingly, all splendid woods, but there is a prejudice, for some reason, against elm. I never understood why, for wretched though it is when green, elm burns beautifully after a summer's drying. Of less common woods I like hawthorn, iron-hard, and red as though stained with its own berries. T. E. Lawrence spoke to me once with great enthusiasm of hornbeam, which he burned frequently. He held it, as far as I remember, next to oak and beech. Maple is also good, a yellowish-white, straight-grained wood, which burns like ash. It cleaves and kindles like matchwood. Last winter I burnt ivy, as thick as a man's thigh, and a vast hazel trunk, a foot or more across. Both are ephemeral. Willow, in my experience, is the sweetest of woods. Dried, like elm, by a summer's storage, it burns almost flamelessly, smouldering quietly, simply crumbling away, the smoke wonderfully blue and sweet. It comes into its own, like apple, on dry spring evenings or in early autumn, when the heat of a fire means little, and the sight and odour of it so much.

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Tree Surgery

If winter reveals the beauty of trees, it is also merciless in exposing damage and defects. The fierce weather of 1935—a bitter year for all tree owners—has been so disastrous that it seems no exaggeration to say that 90 per cent. of the trees in this country are now in need of surgical attention. The attitude of the average owner of large trees is astonishingly indifferent. He seems to consider tree surgery an expense only to be undertaken in extremity, or he has fixed in his mind the notion that trees can take care of themselves or that anyway they are as good as everlasting. Yet the fall of a tree brings him to tears, and a stack of firewood, incidentally bought from himself by hard cash for woodmen's wages, is poor consolation. Yet the expenditure each winter of a few pounds and the intelligent application of the principles of such a book as Mr. A. D. C. Le Sueur's *Care and Repair of Ornamental Trees* would save tears, trees, money and all. Incidentally, it is worth noting that the practical and economic possibility of producing higher grades of timber by careful pruning of standing trees is a problem that is being investigated by the Forestry Commission, and the Research Laboratory at Princes Risborough is making many examinations and experiments.

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Allwoodii

The late William Robinson grew very irate on the subject of Allwoodii pinks. He wrote that the name was false, that there was no such plant, that he had never seen a hybrid—as the Allwoodii was claimed to be—between Dianthus caryophyllus, the carnation, and D. plumarius, the garden pink, and in his sturdy, rather clumsy style, which too often defeated its own ends, he went on to say that he had written about it to the Royal Horticultural Society, and to the raiser, that no one had taken the slightest notice of him and that, finally, he had been driven to state the truth. Whatever the truth may be, it is worth noting that the Allwoodii race not only survives but grows in glory too, and those who are interested in both the truth and this charming family of pinks are directed to some remarks on the genesis of Allwoodii by the raiser himself. He is Mr. Montague C. Allwood, whose excellent book, *Carnations and All Dianthus*, is published by his own firm. In this work he states quite clearly, without fuss, and incidentally without any reference to Robinson's protests, that Allwoodii are the result of nine years' patient crossing of the old-fashioned fringed white pink, *Dianthus plumarius* and the perpetual flowering carnation. He makes it plain too that the scientific committee of the Royal Horticultural Society gave the race not only its name but its blessing too. Clearly, I think, he deserved something a little better at the hands of Robinson. The Allwoodii strain has been followed by other varieties, of which the Highland and Herbert hybrids are particularly fine. All, in my experience, are short-lived, but all may be raised with absurd ease from seed.

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A Winter Morning

The morning of December 17th was freezing white, with ice up to half an inch, the rime like snow in the grass, the furrows sheeted with glass. Small-bird life seemed suddenly paralysed. A walk of four or five miles over field paths and green lanes seemed barren of anything smaller than a blackbird. The sky was literally empty, the air still as death, and it was only the cracking of ice underfoot that disturbed anything at all: great chattering flocks of wood-pigeons from the winter cabbages, a few hysterical pheasants, a silly blackbird. It was only towards noon, when the sun was just warm enough to be felt, that the small life began to wake and twitter. A sudden gathering of chaffinches on the bleak boughs of a young ash was worth waiting for then: a party of ten or twelve all clinging sideways to the perpendicular branches, almost inverted, so many rosy-breasted buds glowing against the iron-coloured bark and the wintry blue sky. There was a momentary flowering of wings, and they had gone.

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A Country Dish

Finally, what are wigs? Dictionaries do not help, Miss White says nothing, and I confess ignorance. But Miss Jane Gamer provides the following recipe in a country MS. cookery book of 1854: "Wigs for breakfast: one pound of flour, rub in 2 oz. of butter, 1½ oz. of sifted sugar, the yolks of 4 eggs well beaten, one spoonful of yeast beaten up with sour skimmed milk just warmed; mix all together and let it stand before the fire an hour to rise then make it into wigs and let it stand half an hour on the tins before they are put into the oven—half an hour will bake them. This will suffice for a party of five with moderate appetites—but if great gormandizers a larger quantity will be necessary."

I commend the dish to those who rise early, travel far, and deplore the current fashion of which a broth of cornflakes and thimble measure of lemon juice is called a breakfast.

H. E. BATES.