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Journey into Spring

By H. E. BATES



The beginning of the journey . . .



. . . in Paris, a peach tree dainty as a parasol



The River Yonne, sunlight and wine-sweet air

. . . all winter lost in the drowning blue of a southern sky,
in the drifting sweetness of jasmine and rose

WE began to drive south through France in what ought to have been the spring time, after the wettest winter Europe had known for eighty years. Wheatfields in Northern France, across the long switchback countryside of the Pas de Calais, always so beautiful with ripe corn in mid-July, were simply lakes of glassy water pelted by sudden white squalls of hail and snow. Down the long high avenues of elm and poplar occasional gangs of workmen were lopping, after the universal French fashion, every lateral bough from the tree trunks, leaving them simply like black scaffold poles sprouting a few dismal boughs, like crow-scaring inside-out umbrellas, at the top. There was not a single touch of green on them or, indeed, on anything else except an occasional hawthorn bush in the shelter of a hollow.

At Beauvais we were glad, together with a number of other desolate travellers,

to remain over lunch and its attendant and necessary coffee and brandy until nearly four o'clock, watching through the restaurant windows ghostly bits of sunlight running swiftly away before raw chasing rollers of cloud, black and then vicious white with spitting snow.

It was not until we got to Paris that we saw, in a little suburban garden of otherwise unrelieved dismalness, in front of one of those shuttered grey-blue French houses that always look like abandoned signal boxes, tolerable only in the gaiety of summer, a small peach tree. Its leafless branches, not much wider than a good-sized parasol, were dark pink with flower.

At Versailles and then again at Fontainebleau, through the long avenues of forest, the sun came out. Its colour was almost green, a sort of sharp golden green, in its late brilliance, and there were touches of green on hornbeams and

hazels on the forest edge. A few white anemones were out and a man and a girl, bare-headed, arm-in-arm, were stepping delicately over the puddles as they came up to the road from one of the long woodland paths.

There was still no real greenness anywhere, except the late and lovely greenness, really a rare sort of gold, of the evening sunlight; but in the gardens about Fontainebleau a few more peach trees were in flower, and on the roadsides farther south, always against saturated and desolate fields, a few bushes of black-thorn. All the time the sky was clearing, less green and sharp and more golden and tender, until at last, at Sens, just before sunset, the whole evening was embalmed in a pale orange ripeness, under a cleared sky. But there, too, the streets were lakes of mud, like brown batter, and the night air was bitter as December.

Southward, in the morning, spring

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Anemones like stars beneath the olive trees, and Grasse itself, flower-haunted in the hills

began. It came, first of all, in handfuls: at first hardly even in handfuls, only in fingerfuls, in a few sprigs, as it were, of roadside cowslips. I have never counted the blackthorn, even in fullest flower, as a tree of spring-time. It is a bitter, comfortless sort of tree, a black widow left over from winter; and although all that morning, all down the wide valley of the Yonne, one of the most beautiful of France's many beautiful rivers, there were miles and miles of blackthorn in blossom, they did nothing to take away, for me, the old sour taste of a winter that had stayed too cold, too wet and too long.

The countryside here is wide and full of

meadows; and soon not only the roadsides but the meadows were yellow with cowslips, thick and sweet and trembling everywhere. There were miles and miles of cowslip fields. There were now also full leaves, almost flags of green, on some of the chestnuts, and even an occasional eye of green, pale as the cowslip stalks, on the new-pruned vines standing like stunted knobs in still flooded furrows.

But that morning, everywhere, it was really the cowslips, in their warm and golden millions, that brought spring flowing up to us from the south, blooming in air that was softening every hour

until at Macon, where we lunched on the banks of the Saône, another exquisite river, the water of the stream was brilliant blue and the sun warm at last without treachery.

Hereabouts, as in so much of Central France, the country is wonderfully, almost painfully, like England. Hedge-rows, little fields of pasture, straggling roads, shapely copses, cowslips and cows: nothing I have ever seen in Europe has quite the same nostalgic pattern of home. And it was here, on a scrubby hillside, rather like a hungry slope from the Berkshire or Sussex downs, that

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Avignon and the bridge which spans its placid waters

contemplation. Still, I was a little hurt at being cut by an old friend. I turned away with a heavy heart and then looked back. Perhaps, after all, he was not our cherub, but only his twin brother. Yes, I told myself, it was his twin brother, turned out by the same hand, at the same time, from the same workshop.

Not a little comforted I went on my way, but once again I looked back. What was that? Was it—could it be—a friendly wink? I wonder.

THE END

Journey into Spring

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we saw, for the first and only time, what I had been looking out for. A few silvery purple groups of pasque flower, *Anemone pulsatilla*, like down-hanging silken bells, were growing among stunted cowslips in the chalk.

We came, that afternoon, into a countryside of peaches. I dozed a little in the car after lunch and woke, warm with sleep and sun, to see a landscape of long valleys, against blue-grey distances of mountain, on the sides of which countless orchards of peach trees were smouldering in airy puffs of pink, some light, quite shell-like, some darker, with a brilliant raspberry rose. All the valleys south of Lyons were alight with these peach orchards under a lovely tender sky.

Cherries were in blossom too: but never quite so startling or, for some reason, quite so endearing and delicious as the airy transparent peaches and the darker rose-bud nectarines. A few apples were beginning to show flower buds and there were everywhere stronger breaks of green among the vines, but the cowslips had finished now, with the blackthorn, and here and there dark knots of maroon were breaking in lilac trees. Hawthorn everywhere was in vivid acid leaf and on the long avenues of plane trees, especially about Orange, on the edge of Provence, there were breaks of palest, almost yellow green on the high bony branches.

The English, to their great impoverishment, have neglected the plane tree. In England indeed there is a fixed belief, almost a tradition, that the plane tree does not belong to the countryside and that it is exclusively, thanks to some peculiarity of constitution that enables it to resist the smoke and sulphur of London, a tree of the town. As a consequence London is full of plane trees; whereas in the countryside there are practically none.

France, on the other hand, has a million plane trees. Prodigiously, with abandon, almost with joy, one feels, she has planted them everywhere: in streets, in squares, in market places but chiefly, and most liberally, on those long stretches of road that carve across France like great steel tape measures. And there, I think, they are probably at their most beautiful. The long lines of peeling grey-yellow trunks, capped in spring by buds of almost primrose green, darkened in summer by leaves of large cool friendliness, have a quality of dignity and refreshment given, I think, by no other tree. They seem to illustrate perfectly, too, the French notion of travel: that roads are for the simple purpose of getting somewhere and that trees are for cheering and shading the traveller as he goes.

Occasionally, the French vary their avenues of plane trees with horse chestnut, and these were in full leaf, with a touch of flower, as we drove down beyond Avignon, into the dusty beauty of Provence, with its hillsides of wild mauve-grey rosemary, the following day. Here, for the first time, the soil was white and dry; dust was rising in the vineyards. Broom, thicker it seemed, more clotted and more richly yellow than our own, was spouting everywhere from low hillsides of grey rock under pine and wild olive and, nearer the coast, forests of cork trees. Walnut-dark trunks, skinned of bark, squirmed knottily from grey scree and rock and shale that were graded off into still subtler tones of grey by bushes of wild rosemary and lavender and cistus and thyme.

By afternoon the cistus, for the most part pink in flower, the kind of pink that is on the head of a matchstick, had finished their day. The large floppy rock-rose blossoms had dropped. But in the morning, in sun, they were in full glory: generally soft pink against grey, occasionally pure white, but smaller, against leaves of bottle green.

And among them, even down to the edge of the roadside, large and airy anemones of purple and wine-pink and white, and then small irises—that is, small in height, but furling and flag-like in flower—of canary yellow shot with purple, pale yellow with white, purple with cream, and pure white cross-veined with minutest stains of mauve. They clung to scree and rock and roadside with burnt white fists, spearing up dwarf lime-green leaves and flowers of orchid shapeliness: and sometimes among them touches of grape-hyacinths, powerfully blue, like threads of brilliant turquoise-black touched with a bloom of dust from the road.

Everywhere, too, that day, the wistarias were in bloom. They trailed over roadside cafés, on arbours, on trees, over farm walls. Farther north, even down to Avignon, they had been simply ropes of silken knots, almost colourless, hairy with down. Now they were spilling and climbing everywhere: strangling up eucalyptus trees, over cherry trees heavy with small green fruit, over black cypresses. A touch of mistral, dusty and gusty, rather than cold, had blown about Avignon and its cypress-barricaded fields, but southward from Aix, a delightful town of dignity and overpowering Martian

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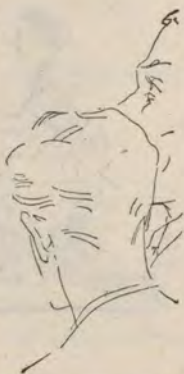


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plane trees, the air lost all treachery, and with the change came the abounding wistarias, so rich and riotous, and the first roses.

By this time, nearing the coast, you could hear people complaining of the sad, long winter. Never, you could hear them say, was there a winter like this: no sun, only rain, every day rain, and all the gardens ruined. And then you saw the roses, dark red, cherry-pink and that special tender peach-colour, just touched with gold, that is the glory of Provence, everywhere. Fat and crinkled, like stirred pink cream, they glowed on walls and pergolas and houses, and with them an occasional tree of pale yellow, a noisette sort of rose, a little paler and larger than the yellow jasmine that was blooming everywhere, over gateways and walls too and sometimes on the trunks of palms.

A few late mimosas, of the long-leaved variety, were still in bloom; arum lilies were cool and lovely in the shade; solid streams of geranium and mesembrianthemum poured from rock and walls and peas were in full flower in the fields, where vines were spouting tendrils—oh! the long, sad winter, with hardly any sun, and all the gardens ruined.

We drove on that afternoon through the burning brown gorges of the Estorel, smouldering under blue sky, and on through flat fields of carnations. The rocks were ferned with grey clumps of *Cineraria maritima*, in which park gardeners delight as they fashion their summer bedding. I had known and grown it often, never bothering to think about the *maritima* part of it; and now it was here, by the sea, true maritime, salt-coloured, another strayed sea-plant to set beside asparagus and seakale. It was a little flabby after winter, quite outshone by the rising nobility of aloes, flaunting already the most tremendous flower-shoots, like totem-poles. Their blue-grey leaves were exactly the colour of the sea but later that afternoon, as always, the sea took all the glory of the day, calming and softening down and in its smooth surface reflecting, in exquisite mixture, the blues, the greens, the pinks and the pale and changing coppers of dying sun.

Beyond the bays there were sudden revelations of shining snow. We drove up to them a few days later. A burst of heat in the great cup of hills about Grasse, where fields of lavender were growing, brought blue and pink anemones out like flaring stars under the olive trees, and all up the slopes a million cistus were in flower, with rows of big common blue flags on the fringes of vineyards.

We drove through formidable gorges of burnt sienna rock splashed with emerald broom and pine to reach the snows about noon. Up there little alpine villages, half in, half out of snow, had all the tawdriness of slums after the burial of winter. An odd skier was punting lazily through the upper pines, all alone, exactly as if looking for something he had lost far back in winter, and girls in black ski-trousers were walking along streets that were furrows of water and brown-black snow. The great dreariness of thaw had settled in: sad, ugly, messy, a horrible left-over on a dirty plate. Not a scrap of beauty was anywhere visible until suddenly, on cleared patches of alpine grass, we saw the first crocuses.

Pure white at first, exactly the colour of the fading snow, and then brilliant iris-mauve, strong and starry, they had the effect of many little lights on an earth made tawdry by thaw. And then, a few moments afterwards, they were gone. There were no more of them, and we were suddenly down below the snowline, in valleys half in winter, half in spring, among willows with yellow catkins and a few primroses by the waterside in the gorges below.

Only eleven days later we were coming north again. The riot of roses, the great festooning glories of wistaria and jasmine and pale blue plumbago had not simply richened; they too were travelling north. All spring was rushing up through France, in an immense sappy vivid surge of acid and trembling leafiness. The Frenchman who spoke of the incomparable acid greens of England could never, I feel, have looked at his own country in spring. All the lushness of England in late maytime, of olive oak flower splashed with wild cherry, of green-varnished poplars and flopping may blossom, of meadows flaunting with buttercup: all of it was, if possible, more lush, more brilliant and more moving in the long wide valleys of France as we drove home.

And it was not only the brilliance and richness that was startling; the speed of its happening was a miracle. All the peach orchards about Lyons had finished their flowering and were in full leaf. As far north almost as Paris the cowslips had disappeared. Lilacs had joined wistarias to give luxurious shade to gardens that had been naked to sun as we first passed them. Dust was blowing in vineyards, all sparkling with fresh shoots that had been flooded only a week or so before, and at noon it was too hot to eat in the sun.

And then, in the heat of a clear spring morning in the countryside somewhere between Valence and Auxerre—Auxerre being only one of several superb and ancient French townships with the loveliest of water-fronts on a wide river—I had the desire, as always at some time every spring, to stop the flow of it all and let it rest there.

Nothing of later summer could ever, in any way, be more beautiful than this. The trembling and restless transience of the whole thing made the heart spring and turn over and ache with joy. In England more than half the beauty of spring is its length; its long four-month course draws out slowly, uncertainly, with repeated moments of exquisite and infuriating change. But here in France summer was folding over spring before spring had half-unfolded itself. The plane trees, naked as bone when we had driven south, were now giving thick and welcome street shade. And in front of houses women and girls were sitting out—infallible sign of French summer—on comfortable hardwood chairs, knitting and gossiping and

watching the world go by. All France south of Paris was brooding and basking and settling down like an old dreamy hen for summer. The crown of all these delicious moments of feeling, heightened always by the fact that, in a car, you are drawing away, at sixty miles an hour, from the very thing you have been pursuing, came in the forest of Fontainebleau.

It is Paris's great good fortune that she possesses, within twenty minutes' ride of the Arc de Triomphe, several forests of enchanting and ancient beauty, of which Fontainebleau is, even in that company, the loveliest. No man ought to die without seeing Fontainebleau on a warm spring day, with its magical avenues of tender-leaving beech and catkinned hornbeam, and to hear, as I did, the heart-breaking chorus of countless nightingales. The whole world, composed utterly of green leaf and sun and scent of rising sap and involved and lovely choruses of bird song, seemed at that moment sufficiently and absolutely contained simply in what you felt and saw and heard there, shut in by green trees, under a cloudless April sky.

It was, as it turned out, almost the last of that early spring glory. Gradually, north of Paris, the trees went back to leaflessness. Spring, cool and difficult and slow, began to reveal itself again in sharp, wintry bushes of blackthorn, an occasional peach tree, daffodils in gardens and, once more, now rather a belated joy, in cowslips by the roadside. The Pas de Calais, in parts utterly treeless, had the terrifying emptiness of a bull-dozed plain. The cowslips were tossed in cool wind among still dead grass, and women waiting for buses, swathed in black shawls, in dreary little villages, turned their backs on gritty gusts of wind that would bring, by late afternoon, sad sea-mists from the north.

And in England the cuckoo, as always, unflinching, mocked us in a fall of snow.

THE END

Loved by the Lassies *Continued from page 16*

Somewhat later, perhaps, comes the discovery of *Tam o' Shanter* :

*O Tam! hadst thou but been sae wise,
As ta'en thy ain wife Kate's advice!
She tauld thee weel thou was a skellum,
A blethering, blustering, drunken bleezum;
That frae November till October,
Ae market-day thou was nae sober . . .*

*She prophesied that, late or soon,
Thou would be found deep drown'd in Doon!
Or caught wi' warlocks in the mirk,
By Alloway's auld haunted kirk.*

*Ah, gentle dames! it gars me greet
To think how mony counsels sweet,
How mony lengthen'd, sage advices,
The husband frae the wife despises!*

By that time one has got to reading the *Life of Burns*, and it deepens the poet's fascination. It has the light and shade and wonder of a legend. Nothing could be more unlikely than that a great poet should have been born in that small, dark hovel. The literary researchers may babble till Doomsday about the mother's heritage of folk song and the father's passion for education. The rest of us are content to believe simply that here struck the lightning.

Add to this the picture of the unknown young man who set off for Edinburgh from Moss-giel—that windswept farm with its ungrateful soil and its vistas stretching away to Ben Lomond and the Cumnock Hills—and came riding home on his borrowed horse, the acclaimed poet of his country.

Moss-giel today is no museum piece; practically everything but the view has been remodelled since the poet's time. But the big kitchen where the farmer and his household eat their meals and listen to the radio has the same four walls as the one in which Rantin', Rovin' Robin once carried to and fro his despairs and exultations.

From here flowed the satires that made Mauchline village wince. In the drawer of a certain deal table upstairs grew a bundle of songs for handsome Jean Armour, sent to hide her shame in Paisley while her incensed father, the village mason, spurned Rob Moss-giel as a prospective son-in-law.

At Moss-giel for a summer Robin loved the gentle Highland Mary; and there he vowed—by letter—eternal devotion to *Clavinda*, left behind in the capital, her only possible *milieu*.

There was never a woman for whom Robin had no charm, from the village girls who were his loves to the fine ladies who crowded round this amazing young man from the country. What manly simplicity he had, what culture and—on occasion—what devastating boldness!

Jane, Duchess of Gordon, bright star of Edinburgh society, declared that he had swept her off her feet. Douce, motherly Mrs. Dunlop, daughter of the landed gentry, loved to give him advice and have him tell her his troubles. And it was young Maria Riddell—intellectual and woman of the world—who struck the last sparks of gaiety from him when he was trying to play the part of a careful Exciseman in Dumfries, and when he was a dying man seeking health on the shores of the Solway.



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