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Mushroom Time

By H. E. BATES

IF the weather is good, that is, if there are sultry nights and rains and warm moons, *Agaricus campestris*, the common mushroom, is in season between August and November, though with the same weather it will spring up unexpectedly, sometimes, at hay-time, half lost in the long mowing grass. These, in England, are its only seasons. I am aware that quantities of cultivated fungi, very much resembling miniature umbrellas cut out of old bats' wings, are sold in the shops all the year round, Christmas or Easter, moon or no moon, at distressing prices. But I speak of mushrooms—the wild, tender, beautiful pink-gilled meadow mushrooms that are indeed like little white silk parasols come out of fairy tales.

There is really no other mushroom except this, the wild one. A mushroom grown in a hothouse or in the darkness of a disused coal-mine is a tasteless and almost artificial thing in comparison. A mushroom, a real mushroom, is dew-tasty, faintly fragrant of autumn earth, as fresh as morning rain. A mushroom in a shop is, in fact, like a bird in a cage. A pound of mushrooms, please. Good God! The words, for a countryman, are blasphemous. As well ask for a bouquet of buttercups at a florist's, a brace of jackdaws at a poulterer's, as for a pound of mushrooms at a greengrocer's on an autumn morning.

Ask for them, of course, if you must and if you will, but more than half your delight is gone at once if you do: not the delight of eating them or the delight of cooking them, but the incomparable delight of gathering them. And it really is an incomparable delight. Against it the gathering of blackberries is a barbaric and doubtful pleasure of stains and thorns, the picking of sloes and crab-apples a sour-belly business, without a thrill of unexpectedness or expectation. Bend down the briar, shake the tree—like the tale of the snail, that's all there is in it. Not so with mushrooms. Every hedge bears its blackberry, but there are fields and not fields of mushrooms. A likely mushroom field is one with patches of long, tussocky grass interspersed with little green horse-dunged lawns, or an old hay-field where the grass has begun to grow thick and sweet with autumn rain.

But there is no certainty about it. The gathering of mushrooms is all chance and hope.

And the chances are that when the field is found someone will have been there before you. But just as likely not. It's all uncertainty. There is a tradition that to gather mushrooms you must be up and about, like a rook, at five o'clock in the morning. I have never believed it and have never done it, though I have gathered more mushrooms than perhaps I deserve for scorning the rule. Let the shepherd and the poacher have them early in the morning. For my part I like evening, with the fading and not the rising light, the falling dew, the flocks of starlings flying over in the stillness, the rabbits feeding quietly on the edge of the brown copses, the soft, elusive, indefinable smell of the evening itself, and above all the pure whiteness of the mushrooms shining out of the darkening grass in the twilight.

Here, then, is the perfect time. You climb the fence, you begin to wander in the damp field, there is something that shines very white in the grass ahead. You advance, you unclasp the knife, you pause and stoop. A tuft of sheep's wool. It is the first of a thousand trickeries that light and distance will play on you. The field will become full of little whitenesses that will deceive you again and again: white thistleseeds, white flint and stones, a scrap of paper, a late moon-daisy, a puff-ball, a sun-blached leaf, groups of white convolvulus, the white heads of yarrow-flowers. You will grow tired and maddened and finally cunning and wary, understanding why it is easier to gather blackberries. In time also, you will begin to distinguish between one white and another, between a thistleseed and a flower, between a flower and a mushroom. The faintest wind will shake the thistleseed and the flower, but the mushroom is immovable. And there is nothing to match the purity of its whiteness, the living, silky candescence that can be visible across the whole width of a darkening field.

There is no mistaking a mushroom: first, there is no other fungus with a skin just so white and silken, secondly, there is nothing else in the world, not even a flamingo or a rose, that has the same pinkness as the

undergills of a new-grown mushroom. It is an absolute perfection of colour blending: a little crimson, some white, a mistiness of purple. And as though that were not enough the gills, broken delicately as they run inwards towards the fat white stalk, give to it all the softest, shimmering effect like that of shot silk.

After the gathering, then the eating. To come home in the autumn twilight, to peel the mushrooms, to cook, to eat—they are the delights that come next to the gathering. But just as there is only one true mushroom there is only one true way in which to eat it. The cookery books will give you a thousand finicky devices, mushrooms in this, mushrooms in that, but there is only one way—to fry them, simply, with bacon, until they swim in their black fragrant juice. It is the way of the shepherd and the poacher, the way of all true mushroomers since ever there were horses and fields and autumn moons.