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An eminent novelist sets down his secret wish



FAMED AUTHOR of "Fair Stood The Wind For France," "The Purple Plain," "The Jacaranda Tree," H. E. Bates sits in the summer house of his home at Little Chart, Kent. . . .

IF I were a millionaire, I would like to make, on Coronation Day, a simple little international gesture.

I would like to select, at random, a dozen American citizens from a certain spot in the centre of New York—to be exact, outside the doors of the Empire State Building—and transport them to England.

I would not give them seats in Piccadilly at 50 guineas a time; I would not give them free champagne, caviar, and television. I would bring them to my own tiny village, now at its greenest and loveliest, under the beech-woods of the Kentish Downs.

It would cost them nothing. The only condition would be that each of them, like the rest of my fellow villagers on that day, would have to bring his own knife, spoon, and fork.

Now why?

WHY would I do this? For several reasons. In the first place, the Empire State Building contains the offices of the British Consul and it may interest the British public to know that, for the past several years, these offices have been daily picketed by placarded men proclaiming, among other things, that the British Empire is dead, that England is dying, and that—most infuriating calumny of all—we have never had any troops in Korea.

My little international gesture would be designed, in part, to remove these misunderstandings. And I can think of no better way of doing it than by showing how this ancient and lovely little English village is going to celebrate its joy at the Coronation of its Queen. And, incidentally, by letting 12 misinformed strangers hear, among our green fields and woodlands, the entire heart of England beating.

First homage

FIRST, the scene. It has, I think, a few more beautiful. Chestnuts crowded white with blossom. Woods smoky mauve with bluebells. Cottage gardens bright with blowzy peonies, irises, poppies, columbines, the first roses of the year. Lambs fattening among belly-high buttercups. The pub planting out its red geraniums.

It is to this pastoral spot that I should bring my American friends at nine o'clock on the morning of June 2. They would be just in time for church service, the first homage of the day of celebration.

Here, I'm afraid, I should have to do a little explaining. Our church, I fear, is nothing much to look at. It is a simple hut of corrugated iron.

We once had a church, a fine, sturdy-towered building of Kentish stone, but I should have to explain to my friends that a flying bomb—one of a mere 4,000-odd that fell

WHAT I'D LIKE TO SHOW the WORLD

by H. E. Bates

about us—dropped slap on top of it and left it a heap of dust.

After church, we should be able to watch the planting of a tree: a cedar of commemoration. And that would give my friends the chance of shaking hands with the little old lady who will plant it.

She would not make, I think, any great claim to fame. She is simply an Englishwoman—one of the many who saw out the Battle of Britain when it was fought above her head, who stuck it out through the gushy clatter of doodle-bug alley and never turned her back.

At half-past two we should see the children parade their decorated vehicles. The small village street—it has one pub and one shop—will be gay with flowery bicycles, streamered trucks, and no doubt with glamorous dolls' prams.

The races

AT three o'clock there will be races—the great treble classics of egg-and-spoon, three-legged, and sack—in the pub paddock. By four o'clock the tears of the consolation race will have all been dried.

By this time my friends would have been able to drink in all the heady richness of our English early June. And if the day is they should be thirsty.

But they would, I'm afraid, have to wait for their tea—first while the children tuck away large quantities of

chocolate biscuits, cakes, tarts, jellies, custards, ice-creams, and, I sincerely hope, sticky buns. Then, while new crown pieces are being presented to the 12-year-olds, and china mugs, true to tradition, to the five-year-olds. And then while the ladies disport themselves with the gentlemen at cricket.

After crusts . . .

NOT until 6.30, in fact, would my friends get the chance of using their knives, forks, and spoons. And then they would be able to use them, I think, magnificently. For this village of mine has decided, quite rightly, that it has had its bellyful of the austere crusts of war and peace. On this royal day it is going to eat in royal fashion.

Chickens in aspic, hams, tongues, pork pies, veal and ham pies, salads of all kinds, spiced beef, sausage rolls, mousses, trifles, meringues, sponge cakes, plum cakes, crackling fresh cos lettuce.

And tea, and more tea, and still more tea, so that at eight o'clock no one, I fear, will be in a fit condition to attempt the hundred yards handicap in the paddock behind the pub—a race in which I achieved a temporary and heady fame by winning a vast Dutch cheese, in pretty fair time, at the last Coronation.

This time, however, I should be happy merely to watch the blindfold donkey race with my guests. For I should want them to be

ready, above all, for the greatest moment of the day—the moment when, at 8.50, my fellow villagers of all kinds and classes will gather in the village hall to listen to the voice of their Queen.

Free beer

AND, if they can get through that occasion unmoved and dry-eyed, I have to confess that I am no judge of men.

By this time the light will be falling. The beer—free, naturally—will be ready for the drinking of the loyal toast.

At ten o'clock the fireworks will begin to burst above the old red-brown houses, lighting up the chestnut trees. The bonfires will begin to redden the sky.

At this moment I should like to take my guests away from the jollifications of my village and up to the silence of the hills, a mile or two away, where Chaucer's pilgrims once trod the chalk road to Canterbury.

Not far away, a couple of thousand years ago, the fires of Caesar's camp also reddened the English sky.

The heart-beat

"TAKE a good look," I would say to my guests, "and listen hard. The glow you see in the sky comes from the fire of a great people who are happy. The silence you can hear is the living beat of an enormous heart.

"Go home and tell your friends—especially the placarding gentlemen in New York—that England is neither dead nor dying. Tell them what joy you have seen in her green fields today."