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stranger who accompanied me to the sessions of sweet silent thought. I do not allow myself to dream 'd'impossibles Ecbatanes.' Nor, were the Goddess of Fortune to offer me an exchange, should I accept her offer, since I do not desire to be deprived of any of my past experiences and can certainly not afford to surrender a single item of my existing equipment. I do not ask to be accorded miraculous adventures or to become suddenly endowed with genius, beauty, heroism, saintliness or a rich baritone voice. It is just that in times of self-reproach I utter a wistful prayer to the great goddess who presides over Antium, begging her to accord me at least the memory of some additional experience or to endow me with some comparatively minor faculty, the exercise of which would have added, and might now add, even more to my enjoyment of life.

It would have been agreeable, for instance, had I been gifted with physical dexterity. Even in a negative sense, it would be comforting to master my habit of breaking porcelain, to be less thumb-fingered when adjusting the ribbon of my typewriter, not to bump so badly into people when gazing at shop windows, and not to spill food. How wonderful it would have been if, from the age of eight onwards, I had possessed the faculty of throwing, kicking, striking, or catching balls! My assumed indifference to Test matches and football results is, I am fully aware, a device to protect myself against the ever-living pang of being bad at games. Often do I tell myself stories of how I win the public schools rackets championship; of how, with commendable sportsmanship and modesty, I receive the plaudits of the massed benches at Wimbledon; or how, within but three minutes of the time for drawing stumps at Lord's, I give such a mighty swipe that the ball rises in the air and descends with a crash upon the pavilion clock. I am sure that, had I been thus talented, I should not have allowed my gift for gymnastics to have dimmed or narrowed my interest in the arts and that I should have been able to resist the tragic, muscle-bound arrogance of an Olympic champion. My youth was clouded by my physical ineptitude, and even in adult age, when I attempted to play golf or tennis, my sons would roll in an ecstasy of merriment upon the fairway or the court. Yes, one of the minor boons I should demand would be to be, not averagely, but excessively good at games.

Terribly, sometimes, I yearn to sing. Yet if the goddess, when I lead my heifer to her altar at Anzio, were well disposed, I should ask her for the little boon of mimicry, surely one of the most valuable social assets with which a man can be endowed. Gone would be the days when I regretted that, whereas other men succeeded in holding the table, I have never in any country encountered a table that I can hold. 'Now please,' my hostess would entreat me, while an expectant silence spread around, 'please give us your imitation of Anna Pauker?' But here again it would be no good my just being a competent mimic; I wish to be a superb mimic of the standard of Ruth Draper, or Peter Ustinov, or Lloyd George. Not for me the sibilant slurrings with which so many of my friends seek to reproduce the accents of Winston Churchill. My mimicry would be so far-flung and so precise that in a London dining-room I could make men and women feel that they were travelling in a barge down the Euphrates

or that a Buganda veterinary surgeon had come to luncheon. How adequate, if given the gift of mimicry, I shall become.

Then I should like to be an ornithologist and stroll about the fields and woods bird-watching with my binoculars dangling from my neck. I should wish to be able to tell people why it is that a thrush can take three hurried steps along the lawn and see, or hear, or feel, the presence underneath it of a silent worm. I should wish to know why my beloved little tufted duck will suddenly leave the upper pond and waddle down to the lower pond by the woods, abandoning her husband and her daughters, swimming solitary among the reeds, and returning only on the afternoon of February 14 when the mating season is due. I should wish to be able to recognise, not the muscovy ducks only, or the rosy-bills, or the pochards, or the Carolina drake with his chest of cloisonné enamel, but also the musk-ducks of South America, the tree-ducks, and the Anatina Galericalata of China. It is with envious delight

that I watch Peter Scott or young Mr. Attenborough showing us these glowing birds on television as if they were just ordinary animals. No cultured people, not even the Dutch, are indifferent to ducks.

I should desire also to be endowed with what the Romans called *Os*, meaning thereby—not effrontery, not brazen-facedness, not insensitiveness—but the ability to address audiences without fear. This faculty is specially valuable to politicians, who have often to speak to a critical or hostile public and who may even be assailed on occasions by the thought that some members of the audience may know more about the subject than they do themselves. How helpful it would be to possess the *Os* of Aneurin Bevan, or Lord Hailsham, or Mr. Nkrumah, or Abdul Nasser, or Mr. Colin Wilson! Yet if that were accorded I should, I suppose, again cease to be myself and become someone else. So I had better stick to ducks and not allow myself, as 1957 slides into 1958, to dream 'd'impossibles Ecbatanes.'

Landscape Lost

By H. E. BATES

TWENTY-FIVE years ago, when we came to live on this village green, a farm labourer earned tenpence an hour; a crazy yellow wasp of a bus ran no more than two or three days a week into the nearest market town, though many a countryman never went beyond his parish boundaries during the entire course of a year, except perhaps to buy himself a pair of winter boots after hopping; and in an endless solitary perambulation one roadman kept our deep lanes neat through the long cycle of snow and primroses, cow-parsley and golden hornbeam leaves.



We were really rural; we really lived in the country. Not isolated, though tucked away, we sat practically in the centre of a triangle made up of three great parks and their mansions. Our square-towered village church stood separated from us on the crown of a little hill among cherry orchards where sheep grazed. The land about us seemed, at certain seasons, to be one great pheasant-scape. An ancient game called goal-running was still played by local teams and men bore such names as Flannel and Codger.

There was, as I remember it, a certain immensely pleasant untidiness about the land. Woods were deep, smouldering, dark and, it seemed, unviolated; and vigilant gamekeepers constantly patrolled with deep bags and lowered guns behind high hedgerows. In the village paper mill, where paper had formerly been made for those great presses, Kelmscott, Ashdene and Dove, paper was still being made by hand, stout as calico and as smooth as birch-bark, and in many colours.

The next village, to the boundaries of which we were joined by a magnificent double avenue of elms, was equally untouched and pleasant;

some would say more so. It sat on the fringe of one of those virgin stretches of common land that are really ancient forest: a place of open heath broken by knolls of pine, copses of Spanish chestnut, much holly and immense fluttering silver poplars. White cotton-grass waved among lilac stretches of heather in summer-time. It was so little touched by man that sometimes in hot years its foundations of peat started burning, the fires running underground, in a slow blue smoulder, impossible to put out. In winter and spring bushes of gorse stood everywhere like lighted Christmas trees, to be followed by yellow whips of broom.

In those days I was fond of telling readers of the *Spectator* that there had been a revolution, drastic and swift, in the countryside; as indeed there had. I confess I was unprepared for another.

Today the three great houses have disappeared, completely wiped from the face of the land except for a late peach-wall or two, and much of their parkland timber with them. The church has gone, knocked to a stony skeleton by a doodle-bug that dropped on it one July evening, like an evil hornet. The avenue of elms has gone, looking very much as if another doodle-bug had ploughed it asunder. Almost half the woods have gone and in one of the few remaining copses the local rural district council engages in the pleasant pastime of dumping raw sewage. The paper mill, though flourishing, no longer makes paper. Our roadman has gone, replaced at certain seasons of the year by a mechanised gang that, in the course of a day, gives our narrow lanes a sort of Teutonic haircut and abetted each May-time by a solitary figure who arrives with no other purpose than to cut down every spray of kex, that most lacy and enchanting of roadside flowers. Above all, our village street is now as firmly paved, kerbed and concreted as Piccadilly.

In the next village the revolution has taken much more evident and more material form. The local rural district council, encouraged by the county council, who are next year going to give

us yet another nasty bang in the eye about rates, and doubtless further encouraged by that mysterious body *The Ministry of Town and Country Planning*, has gouged the heart out of the common, cut down several acres of trees and put in their place an arrangement of brick, concrete and wire called a housing estate that resembles an army barrack block. Nor, it seems, do their designs end there. There is yet plenty more common left to be carelessly planned and played with.

These changes, small no doubt in themselves but merely a sinister part of a vaster pattern, recall a remark of Mr. John Betjeman's: namely that in all too short a time Southern England will become as ugly as Northern France. To this I take exception. For it seems plain to me that unless we are all mighty careful over the next quarter of a century Northern France will, on the contrary, become as ugly as Southern England. Each year the arteries of suburbia widen, spread and pump into this Kentish landscape of ours so many more red brick corpuscles of houses, estates, and sub-topian development that presently people escaping to the countryside must inevitably, it seems, have no countryside to escape to.

In the suburbanisation of this, still the most exhilarating and varied of all our counties, a strange fact sticks out: namely that this prosperous countryside is littered with empty houses. End-

less numbers of country cottages, of the kind for which in the uneasy Thirties everybody was searching, stand waiting for tenants and buyers. Everywhere they stare out at you from behind their ghostly sale notices, their ghostlier thistles.

As I probe for the reason behind all this, and cannot find it, I am impelled to think of another ghost. Driving away on a late October day from this village green I had necessarily to brake sharply in order to avoid what I thought at first was a pure white cat, sitting motionless in the car's path, in the middle of the road. When I stopped and alighted it blinked at me for the better part of a minute with half-blind, dopey eyes, with a sort of pouchy hangover, and then flew away.

It was a young, white owl; and as it flew away to disappear into the black branches of a turkey oak I felt half-persuaded that it might well be the ghost of the young man who, in the shape of myself, had come to live in a countryside that he considered, and hoped would remain, a paradise. Strangely enough I had once also seen, in that same place, a pure white squirrel, but at that time it had not seemed to me either a sign or portent of the shape of rural things to come. It too had simply disappeared, as so much of my treasured landscape has since done, lost like a ghost in the wind.

Saturnalia is in full swing. We took it from the Romans, and, in England, from the ancient people of the Angli, says Bede, and turned it into a Christian feast on the same date. It goes very deep, it is native to us, this mid-winter saturnalia which we have half-heartedly tried to christianise. Origen strongly deprecated this keeping of Christ's birthday, 'as if he were a King Pharaoh'; several of the more puritan Fathers of the Church have agreed with him. Had St. Paul known what was to come, doubtless he would have written letters against it in no uncertain terms. Puritans much later than the Fathers have rejected it, 'speaking very spiteful things of our Lord's Nativity,' as they dragged Anglicans from church to jail on Christmas morning. The Scotch Kirk, led by John Knox, declared itself definitely against Christmas. It was complained of as a pagan festival; also it contained that unseemly word, mass. Neither reason rings true, both were self-deceptive. Had the Kirk objected to pagan festivals, it would not have taken up the weekly day of the sun with such fanatical fervour, such near-idolatry, exalting it high above any of the Christian feasts and fasts. If asked why, the Elders would reply that Sunday was the Lord's Day, which seems to take us back to the *natalis invicti solis* of their Mithraic ancestors. They supposed it to remind them of the Jewish Saturday, of which they had read with pleasure in the Bible. But really the Sun God reigned, deeply below reason and consciousness, in their atavistic souls; obscured from them by chill grey Scottish murk, he could not be seen by the eye, but they paid him this hebdomadal honour. So they had little honour to spare for the Christian feasts, despising Good Friday and Easter, Epiphany and Christmas, with impartial distaste, but Christmas the most, because of its merry-making and sin. They could not prevent either merry-making or sin all the year round, for the Scotch are naturally boisterous and have wills of their own; they broke out at Hogmanay, and Hallowe'en, and in long summer junketings; but they might not have the Christmas carnival, or maypoles. They might not even go to church on Christmas Day. The Kirk's brief reign in the 1640s over the pleasure-loving and worldly English was embittering for both.

But the English now have their revenge, for it is said that Christmas has been creeping into the Knox stronghold, and that not only Piskies but Presbies are beginning to set up their trees there. It is getting everywhere, this German tree; it is now to be encountered all over Europe: in France, Italy, even in Portugal and Spain, those strongholds of conservative tradition. Before long these lands may burst out into Christmas mumming, boars' heads, yule logs, plum puddings ablaze. But Polish children carry boughs of fir, lighted, through the dark streets, and in Provence, Naples and Portugal the stables and the Holy Family and the shepherds and peasants with their animals stand life-size on their cardboard mountains, and processions wind chanting through the towns.

Meanwhile in England, children, asked what event Christmas is about, are not always sure; their Christmas comics have omitted to tell them, and children, it is said, grow increasingly dim-witted. But they know that the hero of Christmas is Santa Klaus, who, in his snow-flecked scarlet gown, hears their whispered prayers.

Saturnalia

By ROSE MACAULAY

BY what steps, we sometimes ask, did Christmas become the major offensive into which it has, anyhow in England, now developed? It makes a powerful assault also in Germany (west), America (north), the Scandinavian countries and Holland. And, increasingly, it gathers force, spread by Nordic tourism, in those European countries which, some years ago, gave it little secular attention, but confined it to churches, reserving their present-giving and junketing for New Year's Day or Twelfth Day, which has a much longer ancestry as a feast than December 25. When I was a child, many years ago, in a then still almost mediaeval Italian town, no one but we decorated houses with holly or mistletoe, and ours was the only Christmas tree; we invited our neighbours to see it, and they were overwhelmed with delighted amaze at the candled tree with its angels and coloured glass ornaments. '*Che bel costume!*' they cried; and they liked too the holly over the pictures, but never, I think, adopted either custom themselves. Nor did we ever see Christmas mummers, and eating and drinking was in moderation, and Christmas presents were not exchanged, nor cards, and no one sang carols in the streets. The twelve days of Christmas passed quietly, and even Twelfth Day was not uproarious. The churches were not decorated either, but they all had a *presepio*, and the figures for these were sold everywhere; we assembled our own, adding sheep, cows, shepherds, magi, as we could afford them, and once we got a very fine camel. We felt pity for the Italian children, because they had no Christmas stockings, no presents, no tree. We came to regard Christmas as an English feast, which foreigners did not understand, and when

we went to live in England and saw the Christmas junketings, the carolling, the carousings, the mummers coming round, the churches gay with the ivy and the holly, the Twelfth Night revels, we felt that we had come into our national heritage, disgusting though the weather was.



But we were young. We did not know the grim toil that our saturnalia even then involved for our elders. Nor could we guess that it would swell with the years until it became the monstrous expenditure of time, money, strength, health and temper that now it is. Chaos in the streets, madness in the shops, hard labour in the house, expensive toys ill-afforded, expensive food gorged, while in desolate camps far off those driven from their homes shiver and starve. A good time is not had by all, cannot, for lack of means, be had by most. But our rich saturnalia romps along; the churches are crowded for midnight Mass; de luxe Cribs glitter with candles and stars, and the magi ride in with their expensive gifts, while the incense-swinging procession winds round the church, and we sing '*Adeste Fideles*,' and the herald angels sing improbably of peace on earth; how in the world did they think of that?

We go home from church to bed, and wake to more presents, more fun. By and large, the wrong people get the presents and the fun, the people who had plenty of presents and fun before.