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The Season of Catkins

By H. E. BATES

THE season of catkins seems to be brief, to begin only with the first warmth of the February sun and then to peter out as soon as Easter is past and the shadows of the woods are beginning to thicken over the lank rosy-stemmed primroses. In reality it begins much earlier, as far back as September, before the leaves have turned, and goes on much later, not even ending with the yellow oak-flowers in May or the red ash-tree blooms, but only with the tender blanched-green tassels of the sweet chestnuts in July. So that this season of tree-flowers covers more than half the English year, its spring beginning in January, its summer coming in April, and its winter in the heat of summertime.

It is altogether a modest and precious blossoming. It is curious that in England it is the little trees, the doll-trees as it were, that blossom bountifully and gorgeously, and the great trees that break into a sombre and unheeded flowering. No poet that I can call to mind has put himself into ecstasies over the ruby blossoms of the elm or into half the state of singing over the purple catkins of the alder that he keeps for the cherry and the rose. The catkin is a sort of Cinderella among flowers, not so much unwanted as unnoticed. The poet who lifts his eyes to the stars or lowers them for the flowers, the stars on earth, often misses as he does so the flowers that hang between earth and heaven, the delicate and unflashing constellations that light up the dark branches of wintry trees.

This season of tree-blossoms is coming into its spring as I write. It began, as I have said, as far back as September, unheeded, with the little stiff hazel-catkins, softest green and in shape like fairy sausages, very tight and secluded on the freckled hazel boughs among the brown-tipped nuts and the sapless leaves. The hazel is one of those rare trees that begin to blossom before its fruit has fallen, though the flower is only in bud and remains half-seen and half-opened until the tree is leafless. That opening comes at first with extreme slowness, imperceptibly, the catkins still stiff and green and often frost-reddened until the early days of January, the first days of the new light. Until that change and coming of the light the catkins push stiffly skyward, as though seeking it. No sooner does it come than they droop downwards, lengthening with inconceivable quickness, yellower and richer than ever the January sunlight will be. There is a time, just before February, when they hang half-stiff, half-loose, undancing and unfickle, no longer green and not yet golden. It is not their loveliest time, but it is their most triumphant. They have broken through the winter and the darkness. It is an unpassionate blossoming, not to be compared with the bursting of the wild crab bloom or the rose, but it is pristine, the catkins are one with light, responsive to it and governed by it, the tassels richening and lengthening as the light itself richens and lengthens to fullest spring.

Beginning a little later and bursting into a later glory, the willow comes into its spring with the hazel, so that often on warm spinney-sides they light up each other, the silky mouse-silver of the willow against the powdery half-gold of the hazel, the willow-buds like smooth cocoons, the hazel like yellowish caterpillars everlastingly suspended, the one unalterably motionless against the marionettish dangling and dancing of the other.

It seems to me the most beautiful of all catkins, finer, even though it is so little different, than the willow, which comes a little later. Whereas the willow comes late into leaf, the willow comes too soon, so that the leaves

and flowers hide each other a little, producing an effect that is not green and not golden,—a lovely sight, but never so entrancing as that pure and transcendent blaze of gold into which the willow bursts in April.

As with the hazel and the willow, so it is with the alder and the birch—their catkins bud and blossom on naked branches, before the winter is past. And in that lies all their modest and delicate glory. On wet rain-dark winter days, when the sheep-pens on the late root-land are dreary with sludder and the grassland is sodden and lifeless, the birches, planted and self-sown in great copses as they are in the south country, come most suddenly and wonderfully to life. The rain, clinging to their delicate twigs and catkins, seems to undergo a transformation. It is as though the buds perform the miracle of turning the rain to wine, for with the red buds and redder catkins shining through its drops the rain gleams like dim burgundy.

Something of this happens also to the alder. But the alder-branches never hold the rain-drops as the birch twigs do, and the effect is not liquid but vaporous, and not red but purple—a strange haziness of purple shot with the tenderest orange-gold. The alder is a waterside tree and by chance often grows, in the south country, among the plantations of ash and sweet-chestnut that grow up into the thick straight saplings which are cut down, every ten years or so, for stakes and hop-poles. The work is done in winter, from November to February, and it quite often happens that in a waterside copse there are alders to be cut down with the ashes and chestnuts. Where the axe cuts it the ash-wood is white and the chestnut almost as white, but the alder-wood is a wonderful colour, a most vivid orange-gold, like the colour of tiger-lilies, but even brighter. It is that golden-orange colour, infinitely softened and diluted, which is mingled with the sombre purple of the catkins and the clouder purple of the coming leaves.

By the end of May the alder, like the birch and the hazel and the poplar and the willow, is forgotten, overshadowed by the glory of oaks and beeches, the oaks with their pretty yellow tassels bringing the catkins season almost to an end. The end does not really come until July, until the flowering of the sweet-chestnuts, when the pale tassel-flowers soften the hard gleaming light of the drooping leaves under the hot sunshine.

No sooner is it ended, however, than the hazels, breaking invisibly into tiniest catkins under the late summer leaves, are ready to begin again their brief winter, a winter that breaks into spring before the winter of all other life has half-begun.

Le Sauveur

[D'UN CORRESPONDANT FRANÇAIS]

C'EST une vérité de fait que l'Histoire se complait à se répéter. En 1926, deux ans après les élections cartellistes, au moment où la France se sentait, économiquement, sur le bord de l'abîme, la conscience collective du pays réclamait ardemment de ses vœux l'homme qui, pendant les angoissantes vicissitudes de la guerre, avait dignement présidé à son destin. A l'appel de la patrie, Poincaré, comme toujours, répondait "présent," et l'on sait que le miracle, aussitôt, se produisit. En 1934, de nouveau, deux ans aussi—coïncidence qu'il convient de méditer—après le succès du cartel devant l'électorat, le cœur de la France est serré d'inquiétude. Des événements graves viennent de se dérouler; une amorce de lutte fratricide a ensanglanté les rues de la capitale; les ministères s'écroulent sur un rythme de vertige; et une voix s'élève, impérieuse, la grande voix du pays