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MAY IN THE WOODS

By H. E. BATES

WITH the wild cherry in full blossom, the primroses at their fullest floppy lushness and the smoke of bluebells obscuring and finally putting out the fritillary lamps of the anemones, there is no longer any doubt about the wood or the spring. They have become synonymous, full of tree blossom and ground blossom and the incessant passion and passage of birds. The wood is alive as it never will be again. It is still a month from the middle of summer, trees are still more branch than leaf and all day long the birds have no interval of silence at all. And if the full frenzy of song, which nightingale and blackbird make in the drowsy hay-noons of early June, has not been reached, there is a clarity and a shouting of bird life everywhere that is like a silver mocking of winter. The wood is full of it.

There is an everlasting restlessness everywhere. When there is no singing or flight or nest-building there are passion interludes of mating: the fierce pursuit of blackbirds, the fickle beckoning and twittering of chaffinches, hen dancing and simpering from many cocks, cocks fighting, the chosen mate taking his fierce little thrill at last, a rosy-breasted gladiator taking his spring prize.

Along the ridings the cock pheasants strut like painted warriors, arrogant and scarlet and bold with the mating fearlessness. The hens are quiet and invisible somewhere among the bluebell-pierced blanket of sweet-chestnut leaves, nesting close, so close and toning so miraculously with that silvery brownness of leaves that they escape, sometimes, even the eyes of keepers, miracle enough in itself. You come upon them, quite often, in bold and unexpected places, almost stepping on either hen or eggs, the eggs having that same silvery brownness as the back feathers. But if she sits it is the lightning flick of the black-brown eye that betrays her: the sudden blink and the

swift nipping cock-up of the head, only momentary and done in a flash, but somehow too quick and electric for the stir of a leaf. And even then, found, she will still sit there, tight and fearless, feathers down-smoothed, eyes still, head ruckled down into the crinkled cringing neck, still sitting there and still sitting until something, when it seems that she never will move, startles her at last into crazy and ridiculous flight and the revelation of the nest and its almost hot eggs.

They are almost the only eggs in the wood. Pigeons will build in the birches, later. Kingfishers and moor-hens nest with regularity just beyond the wood-edge, in the bank of the river. There is report of a wood-cock and there are a few odd black-birds and thrushes in the chestnut stumps and faggot-dumps left by the wood-cutters. But this whole wood, six or seven acres of it, like so many other woods, can show only a tenth part of the nest-life of the open hedges in the lane.

But if there is no paradise of nests there is, just now, at the lower end of the wood, on a stretch of marshy ground dotted about with big sallows, a paradise of flowers. The lamps of kingcups and the extinguished lamps of lady-smocks burn now everywhere on the open clearing of marsh. Red orchis are coming out among the unbudding bluebells—or rather they are not red, but a pinkish magenta, varying a great deal in colour, as they do in size. They are the kingfingers of children. So what with kingfingers and king-cups and king-fishers and lady-smocks the wood in May has its own royalty.

It is, in fact, for children a royal place. To them it must seem an immense kingdom, the boundaries of which they can never quite grasp. Its trees are almost supernaturally vast; even the hazels are great. To a child there is something about it all, in fact, that is not quite real. It belongs very nearly to the world of the unknown. A field can be seen and understood and explored. Whereas in a wood the wood is very much hidden by the trees: there are countless darknesses, unknown places. It is an exploration into the unknown. It is at once a joyful and fearful place. Children are never frightened in fields, except by cows or by the hostile appearance of irate farmers. But they are often frightened in woods: by the very mystery and seclusion of the place; by the sudden soft hushing of leaves,

by the magnified echoes of feet, by the leaping up of rabbits, by the savage sudden screechings of unknown birds.

They are things which, in broad daylight, mean nothing to us. But night changes them, or it changes us. A wood at night, or even more at twilight, is a strange place. Fear begins to come more quickly in a wood, with darkness and twilight than in any other place I know. I have been in a wood gathering violets or orchis or primroses in the late evening, when the sudden realisation of twilight coming down has sent a sudden damnable running of cold up my spine, and I have half-run out of the place. And that feeling is common. The path through this wood of ours in the lane is public; it leads from one village to another. It is used a good deal by day. But there is a precious little use of it by night, except by the local poacher. People will not use it. "Damned if I've much on that old wood at night. Lumme if I ain't glad when I get out of that place."

What is it? Why is it? It is not simply darkness. We grow used to darkness. It can only be some quality in trees themselves. They impinge on us, hypnotize us more or less by the new fantastic shape that darkness has given them. At one period of my life I did much walking by night: long vigorous walks out of the town into the surrounding country. It was a country that was almost treeless, but if I walked far enough I reached woods. Reaching them, I used to turn back. They had some powerful quality of darkness, some awful intimidating blackness that I could not face. I have been in woods too by day when I have been glad to get out of them again, to see the sky. It may indeed be that shutting out of the sky that feeds fear. There is an extraordinary comfort in the sight of the sky, of clouds and sun by day, of starlight especially by night. Space and distance kill fear at once. It flourishes on littleness and confinement, and it is in the little spaces under the confined branches of woods that it flourishes at times almost into terror.

But if I have sometimes been glad to leave a wood by day I have oftener been sorry. I sat once in a wood on the north border of Bedfordshire, in April, by a keeper's hut, eating an orange. It was perfect weather, quiet and sunny, with a little windy blowing about of the hazels. I had walked up the wood, along still ridings, seeing more primroses and also more oxlips,

which are rather like wild polyanthus, than I had ever seen before or in fact than I have ever seen since. By the keeper's hut there was a biggish pool. Overshadowed by trees, it looked like a stretch of black glass. All over the place was a windy clapping and brushing of bare ash and hazel and, every time the wind turned, a great breath of primrose scent.

Suddenly there was an unexpected stirring about the pool: a flicker of brown, almost fawn, and then another and another. The first I took for a rabbit. Even about the second I had some doubt. After the third and fourth and fifth I had no doubt: they were young fox-cubs. They came tumbling up out of the holes in the pond-bank, in and out, up and down, rolling over and over, playing an endless game of chivvy with each other, until I could count thirteen. As a boy I once held a lion-cub in my hands: he was a fawny gold and like plush, a wonderfully soft golden cat with a sleepy blinking face. Those fox-cubs playing in the wood were very like him: so many little fawny-gold cats playing with a kind of pretty devilry up and down the banks of the pool, running out into the primroses, doubling back, rolling each other over, their soft fur all the time ruffled and rosetted by the light wind, until they seemed like the prettiest creatures in the world.

I sat there for a long time, watching them. The wind was just right, blowing from them to me, and they never suspected my presence. They were endlessly fascinating, tireless in their own devilries, lovely with their sun-coloured fawn and their grace of movement up and down that steep bank, on the edge of the water. And finally I had only myself to blame for upsetting it all. Not satisfied, I moved nearer, slowly and as I thought, quite soundlessly. I got much nearer, stood still. I could see them better. They had no suspicion of me. Then, in a moment, I moved on again. I made no sound. But in a second they were all arrested, electrically, in alarm. They stopped for a single second, cocked their heads, and gave one look at me. In another moment they had gone tumbling down like golden balls into the dark fox-holes, out of sight. And I have never, by some damnable chance, seen a fox-cub since.

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