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the books I want. A good bookseller or public librarian never fails you. They are the best of friends for a time like the present.

There are books too for every mood. Like most others I am deeply concerned about the kind of world we are going to live in after the war. I often hear people say of a famous writer: "I should love to meet him and to hear *his* views on that question." Well, we can meet these men in their books, and get something much better than a casual conversation; we can read their carefully considered opinions. But there are times when we want to forget the mess we are in. That is the moment to pick up a book which will transport us to other times and places, or afford us most necessary entertainment and relaxation.

We hear much today about "Liberty of Thought." True freedom consists not in the liberty to think but in the freedom to express our thoughts, and in the liberty to hear and read the thoughts of others. It is of that liberty Hitler seeks to deprive us. One of my favourite books is a little volume by Lowes Dickinson entitled *A Modern Symposium*. In it the full and free expression of thought is seen at its best. A group of distinguished people meet at a country house, and one by one express their attitude to life. Each speaker carries conviction by his obvious sincerity, and in listening to them one realises as perhaps never before the many-sidedness of Truth and the value—nay more, the necessity—of the right of every individual to be free to express his views.

It is said that a man can be known by the company he keeps. So, too, can he be known by the books he reads, because in reading them he keeps company with their authors. If we have chosen our books wisely we have enjoyed the companionship of the elect, and have done also that most satisfying thing, the cultivation of our intellectual and spiritual gardens.

A distinguished Bishop is said to have advised people during the nightly air-raids:

To commend themselves to God;

To read a book;

To go to sleep.

That seems to me peculiarly sound advice.

OCTOBER LAKE

By H. E. BATES

THE October leaves have fallen on the lake. On bright, calm days they lie in thousands on the now darkening water, mostly yellow flotillas of poplar floating continuously down from great trees that themselves shake in the windless air with the sound of falling water, but on rainy days or after rain they seem to swim or be driven away, and nothing remains to break the surface except the last of the olive-yellow lily-pads that in high summer covered every inch of water like plates of emerald porcelain. The lilies have gone too, the yellow small-headed kind that in bud are like swimming snakes, and the great reeds are going, woven by wind and frost into untidy basket islands under which coot and moorhen skid for cover at the sound of strangers.

All summer, in this world of water-lilies, the coot and moorhen lived a bewildered life. There was no place where they could swim, and all day they could be seen walking daintily, heads slightly aside and slightly down, across the lily-hidden water, as bemused by the world of leaves as they had been in winter by the world of ice. In the clearer water they are more active. The lake is long and unbroken except for two small islands. The birds, as the fit takes them, dash madly up and down it, taking off and touching-down like small fussy black sea-planes. Beside them the arrival of the wild duck, at much higher speed, is almost majestic. They plane down, the necks of the drakes shining like royal green satin, with the air of squadrons coming in after long flights from home.

It was not until late summer that fishing was possible. The water was so low and clear after drought that the fish could be seen in great dark shoals, sunning themselves, shy, impossible to catch. Only in the evenings, as the air cooled and the water darkened, and the surface was broken with the silver

dances of the rising shoals, would you perhaps get a bite or two, a baby perch sucking at the worm, a roach no bigger than a sardine. All the time, on bright hot mornings especially, great pike would lie out in the middle of the lake in shoals of ten or even twenty, like black torpedoes, transfixed, never moving except in sudden immense rises that rocked the water-surface with rings.

It is curious, but all the life on and about water seems to belong to water. Except for a solitary wren fidgeting delicately about the banks under the alder-trees, or a robin singing in the October afternoons across the water from the islands, all the bird-life is that of water-birds. Rooks never seem to come here, nor starlings; an occasional pigeon flaps across to the woods; even the sea-gulls belong to the ploughed land. But wild swans come back to nest in the piles of fawn-coloured reeds in the spring, and two great herons stalk the water-meadows every day, struggling ponderously upwards at the sound of voices. Snipe whirl away across the tussocks of brown-quilled sedge on the adjacent marshland, and a solitary kingfisher breaks with magic electric streaks the dark enclosures under the alders that span the narrowest water. But sometimes, and for long periods, there is no life and no sound at all. The water is slowly stilled after the last fish have broken it, the coot are silent, the leaves cease their shaking and falling in the dead October air. The crimson float comes to rest on water that seems to have on it a skin of oil.

On such still clear days the colour is wonderful. From the south bank of the water poplar and alder and ash and horse-chestnut let fall high liquid curtains of lemon and bronze. Orchards of cherry and pear smoulder with drooping orange flames beyond the light wall of almost naked willows. The oaks are still green, but the beeches in the distances stand like red mountains. And on the lake itself unexpected colour springs up: an island of quince-trees, still green, but hung with many ripe lanterns of bright fruit that no one gathers.

On a Sunday morning, a little away from the lakeside, in the orchard, an old man with red cheeks and white hair fixes a ladder against a tree of pears. What year is it? It is not possible to tell. It is not possible to tell, that is, from the curtains liquid colour that drip down into the lake, the glowing lemon quinces that are falling ungathered into the water, the orchard, the pear-tree, the old man testing with aged feet the set of the ladder, the sound of moving air stirring once again the slow detachments of bright yellow poplar leaves far up the water. It is quite impossible to tell. The beauty and atmosphere of water, the things that flourish on and in it and about it, are quite timeless. So this might be 1840, or 1740; it might be a year when Gilbert White was recording the season at Selborne, when Kilvert was recording with naïve passion the young girls and the young spring times of Victorian Cloy, when Walton, too, was holding a line in this autumn water and waiting for a touch. The silent lake, the turning leaves, the old man under the pear-tree, the float on the water, are words in a language all these men could understand.

There remain the things they could not have understood. Walton would have been puzzled by the behaviour of scores of fish, which leapt high out of the lake after a tremendous and very close explosion on a still afternoon; Kilvert, used to hard Victorian winters, would have wondered about the stray, snow-feathered circles and spirals and figures of eight drawn five miles up in the blue October sky, as if someone had been skating there; White would have been unable to identify the frequent flocks of high white birds, like celestial sea-gulls, or the twinkling metallic objects that fly down into the water from nowhere, like a steel shower of dragon-flies.

None of them would have understood the thunder that shakes the earth on days when there obviously is no thunder, the moan and stutter of a sky that seems quite empty, or the object which suddenly flowers out of the sky like a giant convolvulus of pure white silk and floats down to rest somewhere on Kentish earth. None of them would have understood—and seeing the glowing quince-trees reflected in the calm golden October lake among the dying lily-leaves you could excuse them for it—that this was a battlefield.