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Oak and Nightingale

SUDDENLY about the middle of May, the white flowers of the wild-cherry are gone, and in their place, all over the wood in the lane, there is a great upclouding of yellow, not bright yellow, like a field of mustard, but a greenish yellow, a kind of lemon olive, very beautiful and at first, in the May sunlight, quite startling. It is the oaks in flower.

Until now the oaks have been obscured, principally by birches, now light emerald, on the upper side of the wood and by the alders and pines on the lower, by the waterside. They form, with the Spanish chestnuts, the heart of the wood. It is they who create, from June until September, the almost sunless summer darkness, the hushed leaf-shadow that can be almost cold in a hot noon. As oaks go, they are not old trees: two hundred years perhaps. They have a girth about like that of a pillar-box: they stand stoutly, in their prime, and, since they have been grown quite close, very straight. Even so, they have stood there obscure, leather-budded, decorated high up with a few wintry apples strung on the boughs like the big wooden beads of some native islander. Now suddenly they have undergone a magnificent rejuvenation, an abrupt and vivid change from leather-brown to olive-yellow, from obscurity to flower. They light up the whole roof of the wood. Rising about the birches, they become the upper sun-lit edges of a great cloud of leaf. And on these shadowy-sunny days of May the light does sudden tricks with them, catches a solitary one in a cloud shadow and ejects it again, so that the one tree burns up briefly like a vast candle of yellow, or it catches half the wood in light and half in shadow, so that when the wind moves the cloud again the shadow rolls away like smoke, light tumbling into shadow and the broken shadow finally into unbroken light, into a great sun-stilled balloon of honey-colored leaf.

So COLLECTIVELY, FROM a distance, the oaks look magnificent. They are really kingly now, not only leafed, but tasselled with their innumerable little hanging flowers, very delicate, almost too delicate for trees of such girth and ruggedness. This contrast and combination of strength and delicacy gives the oak a rare quality; it makes it, in May at least, supreme among the trees of the wood. It is undeniably supreme here because this wood of ours contains neither beech nor ash, though there are sapling ashes on the south side, nor sycamore nor maple, both trees very beautiful in bud, with their creamy-wine colored or rosy Japanese beads breaking into curiously Japanese leaf.

The perfect wood would have these trees, and larch as well, more Japanese than ever with its drooping pin-fingers of bright emerald and its scarlet knots of flower. It ought also to have horn-beam and white-beam. It might well have some chance bird-sowing of wild laburnum, as there is in Midland copses I know, where two great light-strangled trees hang their flowers just clear of the tallest hazels, a flaunting yellow, showing just how yellow yellow can be, turning the surrounding oaks almost pallid.

It is IN fact only from beneath the oaks, catching their olive against a deep May sky, that you can see their real vividness. The same holds good for ashes and beeches. You must get under them, lie under them, and look up. The brilliant almost summer light comes down through leaves that are still thin-skinned and delicate. They let the light right through, so that they seem, as you look upwards, to be almost transparent, to be made, the beech especially, of some shining leaf-celluloid. They seem to intensify, at the same time, the blue of the sky, to clarify and deepen it to a faultless turquoise. It is a perfect combination. It never comes again all summer. It is only in May that you can lie or stand or sit in a wood and see that intense lofty miracle of light and

leaf, the off-setting of green by blue, of leaf by sky. In another month the sky will be shut out. There will be a sky of leaves in its place.

It will be a sky, also, of one color: the dark almost uniform green of high summer. Beech and oak and birch and chestnut and sycamore will seem, in July, like the same trees. Now, in May, it seems incredible that summer and the sun can turn them into that uniformity. They burn now with such individuality of color, with all the greens under the sun, that it seems impossible for anyone to change them. And since now, also, bluebell and campion and orchis are in full bloom, blue and pink everywhere, there is no doubt that the wood looks at its best.

IT SOUNDS AT its best. Cuckoo and blackbird and nightingale, by the middle of May, are calling together, the blackbird all day long and in spite of everything, the cuckoo and nightingale passionate in the warm spells, shy and almost silent at the slightest turn to cold and wet. The cuckoo mocks everything in the too-bright early mornings and is himself mocked into silence before noon by wind and cloud. He goes with the weather like a cock on a church. He is all a clatter of arrogance in sunshine, monotonously cuckoo-ing us into wishing him silent. Then suddenly he shuts up, vanishes. All through the spell of cold and wet we hear him from some mysterious distance, as though he had found, somewhere, an inch of summer for himself.

The nightingale is also fickle, but on a different plane. He seems temperamental. He gets far up in the thickening oaks, nothing but a slim bud himself, and is hard to see; or, like the cuckoo, he vanishes completely, effaced by wind and wet into silence. But when he sings, at last, there is no mistaking it. There is a notion that, since he is so named, he sings only by night. It is quite mistaken. He sings all day and, at the height of passion, all night.

IT IS A strange performance, the nightingale's. It has some kind of electric, suspended quality that has a far deeper beauty than the most passionate of its sweetness. It is a performance made up, very often, more of silence than of utterance. And the very silences have a kind of passion in them, a sense of breathlessness and restraint, of restraint about to be magically broken. It can be curiously seductive and maddening, the song beginning very often by a sudden low chucking, a kind of clipping of strings, a sort of tuning up, then flaring out in a moment into a crescendo of fire and honey and then, abruptly cut off again in the very middle of the phrase. And then comes that long, suspended wait for the phrase to be taken up again, the breathless hushed interval that is so beautiful. And often, when it is taken up again, it is not that same phrase at all, but something utterly different, that high sweet whistling prolonged and prolonged for the sheer joy of it, or another trill, the cluck-chucking beginning all over again. It seems to be done out of a kind of devilishness, or in a kind of dream, between intervals of sleep, as though the bird begins its phrase and then drops off and then, waking again, takes up what it thinks it remembers.

The nightingale is not common here. We hear it, but never with that consistent multitudinous performance that, in some woods, keeps people awake at night. I am, in fact, surprised that we should hear it at all, here in a wood whose most constant music, winter and summer, is the keeper's shotgun. I am surprised that it does not shatter that tiny bud of a bird into a far greater silence than even the longest of its own enigmatical pauses of passion between phrase and phrase.