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# A BOY'S BROOK.

By H. E. BATES.

AS a boy I used to spend about half my days on a high piece of farmland, arable mostly, with stiff hawthorn hedges and iron-grey ash trees criss-crossing and dotting the same sort of land for miles about. From that point, on fine days, if we were lucky, we could count the spires of nine churches. We saw, on days of extra good visibility, the light on distant water towers and the drift of smoke from remote brickyard chimneys. At night, if it were clear, we saw the crimson, almost ferocious glow of distant furnaces. But all day and every day, winter and summer, rain or fine, we could see something else. We could not miss it. It lay just below us, a dozen fields away, a mythical stone's throw, running like a steel snake through endless green acres of meadowland. It was the Nen, flowing down to the Wash.



Mr. H. E. Bates.

It is, as its name says, a river of nine sources. I did not know one of them, but I knew a tenth. And that small spring, gushing out from under the raw elbow roots of a clump of cow-smoothed hawthorns, still remains for me not only the source of the Nen, though it never was, but the source of all rivers at all.

### The red spring.

It was a beautiful spring, coming up suddenly in a shadowy place, on a slope, and it was an extraordinary colour. It ran like blood. More truly, it ran out like the long flow of a girl's red hair: a savage auburn red, a kind of bloody rust that stained the bank and spread and oozed and silted all over the marsh at the foot of the slope, crimsoning the watercrosses, bloodying the iris roots and grass and sedge, scumming in small pools, running occasionally as clear as wine, spreading like a fine red varnish down the steep banks of the brook, to be diluted and lost at last. Yet, when you cupped the water itself, it lay in the hand as clear as glass, only infinitesimally speckled with motes of ironstone.

"And by gummy, I bet that's good for folks, ain't it?" my grandfather would say. "Iron? I bet that water'd cure any mortal thing, wouldn't it? Dall it, if we could git anew bottles and bottle it and sell it, we could make money."

"That's what we ought to do," I'd say. "You ever heard talk o' those places where old gals sit and drink water for rheumatics? Well, I bet this is one o' them springs, ain't it? If we could git anew bottles we could make thousands."

"Well, why don't we?" I'd say. "If we could get the bottles I could sit here all day and fill 'em and you could bring the old pony down every night when it got dark and we could take 'em away."

### We never bottled it.

Yes, that was all we ever had to do: bottle that water and fetch it away with the old pony and trap and sell it and make money. But somehow we never did. Something else always cropped up: the sow was in pig, or it was harvest or haymaking or seedtime, or the nag needed shoeing. Somehow we never bottled that life-giving water. But that, my grandfather would point out, was the way of life. Here was Nature providing all that was ever wanted to cure every kind of ill that flesh was heir to, and man took no notice.

Take a thing like herbs. "Boy," he'd say to me as we prowled along that brook, "boykin, I don't care what it is—coughs, colds, belly-ache, rheumatics, wind—I don't care what it is, there's a herb to cure it. You think these things was put here for nothing: these herbs? Look at houndstongue. Look at the ointment that makes. I bet there ain't nothing in the nation world houndstongue won't cure."

Yes, look at houndstongue. That was another thing we were going to make fortunes from but never did. All we had to do was to boil enough houndstongue and enough lard in order to make enough ointment, and finally enough money. Ointment that would cure anything. Boils. Tumors. Cancers. Sores. Bad legs. Chilblains. Black eyes. Festers. Everything. It was, it ought to have been, the wonder of the world. I saw it marketed, advertised. "Lucas and Bates Sovereign Cure—All for all Cases." And once: "Prof. Bates's Miracle Ointment—Soothes all Sores—Pulverizes all Pains." Ointment and alliterations were going to conquer the world, make my fortune. And why not? Fortunes have been made on alliteration alone.

### The lore of herbs.

And I was serious. By day I mooched along that brookside and searched for herbs. By night I read Culpeper. A strange book. There was much in it I did not understand. Take lettuce. "Being eaten boiled it opens the bowels; promotes digestion, quenches thirst, increaseth milk in nurses, easeth griping pains in the stomach and bowels that come of cholera, abateth bodily lust." Take dog's mercury. "The decoction made with water and a cock chicken is a most safe medicine for hot fits of agues." And thorough-wax. "It being applied with a little flour and wax to children's navels that stick out, it reduces them." There was much in it about spleen and travail, phrenzy and lethargy, the veins and the courses, the stone and the cholera.

For myself, I went for things I understood. I gathered yarrow. It was good for toothache. I boiled the roots of elm. The juice was a hair-restorer. I stewed the roots of mallow. They banished coughs, hoarseness, shortness of breath and wheezings. I spent hours with that book. I studied venery, vertigo, vomiting, worms, windiness, wombs, melancholy, the mother, jaundice, leprosy, loss of voice, palsy. Pin and web, St. Anthony's fire, surfeits, swellings, swoonings—in short, everything. I could have passed examinations in it. But the trouble was not to pass examinations, but to find people who had venery, vertigo, vomiting and the rest. I had the cures. What I lacked was the patients.

### Driven out of business.

And that, combined with something else, finally drove me out of business. The something else was the economics of the thing. It was all very well to talk of the free bounty of Nature, but it took six hours' hard gas-cooking to stew enough hair-oil to cure one bald patch, even supposing it cured at all. Again, I got no support. None of my family were bald and I never got a chance. For a long time I kept the bottles of hair-oil in the wash-stand drawer, looked at them every night and hoped and wondered. "Bates's Brilliantine," I was going to call it. Suddenly it began to give off a strange odour. Then it fermented. It worked up like pink beer. Even then I still believed in it. Then it stank. That was the end.

Or rather it was the end of the herbs, but not the brook. As so often happens, I went

out to find one thing, missed it and found another. I cannot remember now about cures for the palsy or what eases the choleric belchings, but I do not need even to shut my eyes in order to remember every detail of the reaches of that small stream.

I wandered up and down it in all weathers, at all seasons. It came down fairly fast, winding, always narrow, with occasional black pools and occasional shallows of white stone and sand. It was overhung, almost everywhere, with hazel and ash and wild-rose and willow, so that it was always shadowy. Winding, cut off into sections by the tall hedges of the fields running at right-angles to it, it had some quality of unexpected and mysterious attraction. Beyond each bend was another. Beyond each field was another. They were all different. And the stream was like some long flowing magnet that drew you farther and farther up the reaches, beyond the known places.

### The world shut out.

It had a great harvest of flower life, some fish, many birds. In places the small meadows had been turned by neglect into small marshes. They bristled with sedge and rush and, in rare places, giant reeds that stood all winter long like great fawn ostrich feathers which the wind shivered and flapped and rattled with harsh noises. Those reeds, in winter, gave the place a forlorn air, a feeling of almost wild solitude. In summer nothing could have been more tranquil. The reeds stood like giant corn; the great hawthorn hedges, never cut for years, shut out the world; the sedge and the brook-sides were starred and pricked with small forests of water forget-me-not and willow herb.

It was all quiet, idyllic, lost, marvellously tranquil, incomparable. Nobody ever went there. The fishing was gone; there was no shooting; it was bad country for horses. A cowman would come down, perhaps, in the early afternoon, hollering and hawking for the herd, and the cows would squelch up and a dog would bark, but they were, generally, all the sounds of the outside world we ever heard there. The stream itself made scarcely any sound at all, only that tinkling-linking, almost gently metallic, almost singing sound as it curdled on stones in shallow places. It had no waterfalls, no bits of foaming and crashing chorus. All the best of its beauty lay in its quietness, in its absolute tranquillity of sound and colouring and movement and scene.

### POISONED BY ARSENIC.

*The Lady and the Arsenic*, by Mr. Joseph Shearing (Heinemann, 10s. 6d.), tells the story of one of the earliest causes célèbres in which modern scientific methods were used for the detection of arsenic poisoning. Marie Lafarge (née Capelle) was a young French woman of noble family, but only moderate fortune, whose relatives had married her to a provincial ironmaster. M. Lafarge was supposed to be wealthy and likely to become much wealthier, but his person and manners were disagreeable and his wealth turned out to be mythical. Early in 1840, after a short married life—long enough, however, to enable him to defraud his wife of her little fortune—he died in suspicious circumstances. The widow was arrested and charged with poisoning him. After a protracted and highly unsatisfactory trial she was found guilty "with extenuating circumstances" and sentenced to penal servitude for life. Her imprisonment was not very rigorous, for she was allowed to write her memoirs and innumerable letters to the newspapers protesting her innocence. She was released after serving twelve years, but survived only a few months. The case remains a mystery, and Mr. Shearing's mode of presenting it does little to elucidate it, for he is unconsciously discursive and addicted to quotation from letters and other documents. What does emerge clearly is that Marie Lafarge was a fine example of the pathological "fantasy" liar—a type to which the excesses of the Romantic Revival in which she grew up gave particular encouragement.