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From My Garden by H.E. Bates



Our favourite novelist tells of a visit he made to a well-known garden and of the two splendid trees he saw there that day

The Handkerchief Tree

On a warm and very beautiful afternoon last June, a friend and I, both of us keen gardeners, decided to shoot ourselves. The arrangement, as in some ludicrously comic opera, was that I should shoot him first and then he would shoot me afterwards. Happily this Gilbertian situation was never realised and I will now proceed to explain how and why it ever came to be thought up in the first place.

There were two causes, one general, one particular. The general one was that we were visiting a garden called Nymans, in Sussex, owned by the Countess of Rosse and maintained by the National Trust. Very well maintained too, since the garden is very large and only half a dozen gardeners are employed. On that particular afternoon, it was in all its ethereal early summer glory, a great pageant of giant rhododendrons, azaleas, shrub roses, fiery embouriums and many splendid specimens of that loveliest of viburnums *V. Tomentosum Mariesii*. It was all enough to make any ordinary gardener weep and the viburnum alone was enough to turn one's thoughts towards self-destruction.

Then suddenly we saw an even more celestial sight and then, as if one wasn't enough, another. These were two immense specimens of the so-called Handkerchief Tree or *Davidia involucrata*, in full and glorious blossom. Now I knew all about *Davidia involucrata*, having read it all up at least 30 years ago, but I had never once seen it in flower and it was these two glorious specimens of it, more like trees filled with pure white birds than handkerchiefs, that brought my friend and I to our moment of desperate despair. *Davidia involucrata* comes from China, where it was first discovered by a French Catholic missionary, Père David—hence its name—in 1869. It was not, however, until 1899 that a serious attempt was made to re-discover it and if possible to bring it into cultivation. To that end the firm of Veitch, of Exeter, issued specific instructions to that great plant collector Ernest Henry Wilson (his contributions

to the herbariums of the world number over 16,000 specimens and he introduced into cultivation more than 1,000 species previously unknown) to go to China and seek out the *Davidia* and if possible collect seeds of it.

These were his terms of reference: 'The object of the journey is to collect a quantity of seeds of a plant the name of which is known to us. This is the *object*—do not dissipate time, energy or money on anything else. In furtherance of this you will first visit Dr A. Henry at Szemao, Yunnan, and obtain from him precise data as to the habitat of this particular plant and information on the flora of Central China in general.' (Such are the wonders of ideological progress that you can, 70 years later, no longer go to China to collect plants at all.)

Wilson duly set off for China, where Dr Henry sketched for him on a piece of notepaper a tract of country about the size of the state of New York, where a tree of the *Davidia*, the only one Dr Henry had ever seen, was growing. The place was in high mountains in a thinly populated area south of the Yangtse river. All China was, at that time, owing to the Boxer rebellion, in an explosive state and at Patung the head official, genuinely alarmed for Wilson's safety (some hundreds of people had lately been murdered locally), did his utmost to get Wilson to abandon the enterprise; but Wilson, unperturbed, went on.

Finally he reached the area where Dr Henry had seen the *Davidia*. Did the local inhabitants know where it could be found? Oh yes, most certainly, and Wilson, now in a state of high excitement, was duly escorted to the place. There, to his horror, he found that the *Davidia* had been cut down a year before and a house partly built with its timbers. Poor Wilson didn't sleep much that night.

All this was in April. Then, on May 19th, five days south-westward of Ichang, Wilson's luck changed and he came upon a mighty *Davidia*, 50 feet tall, in full blossom. His excitement was so great that he confessed that 'I am convinced that *Davidia involucrata* is the most interesting and most beautiful of all trees which grow in the north temperate regions', and this is how he described it: 'The distinctive beauty of the *Davidia* is in the two snow-white connate bracts which subtend the flower proper. These are always unequal in size—the larger usually six inches long by three inches broad, and the smaller three and one half inches by two and one half inches; they range up to eight inches by four inches and five inches by three inches. At first greenish, they become pure white as the flowers mature... when stirred by the slightest breeze they resemble huge butterflies or small doves hovering amongst the trees.'

In due course, Wilson found several other *Davidias* and from them collected a rich harvest of seeds, which were sent back to England. When he finally got back to England himself he found not a single seed, which rather resembles a walnut, had germinated. Some seeds had been sown in strong heat, some in mild heat; some had been soaked in hot water, some in cold; some had been sown in propagating beds outside—all to no avail. It was not in fact until Wilson examined the seeds sown outside that he at last found signs of germination. The frosts of winter had done their work; it was our old friend stratification performing its miracle once again.

Go therefore to Nymans (or Kew) at the end of June or in July and gaze on this incomparable creature in all her celestial glory. And if she should happen to bring tears to your eyes, as she may well do, you can always console yourself that there will be plenty of handkerchiefs on the branches to dry them with! □□

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