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White World by H. E. Bates

I have a certain passion for white flowers. At the same time I am fully aware that great numbers of people take an entirely opposite view and cannot tolerate the thought or sight of white flowers at any price. I recall a rather select luncheon party a couple of summers ago. As we sat down to table it suddenly seemed to me that my hostess had become singularly tense. This state of affairs grew rapidly worse until she at last sprang to her feet, seized a vase of flowers from the centre of the table and threw it out of the window.

'I can't bear them! I can't bear them! I simply can't bear them!' she cried.

The offending objects were a couple of white arum lilies. Useless for me to point out the classical purity of the flower, its likeness to a horn or certain types of sea-shell or that its elegance was most striking when it grew wild.

'Horrible. Can't bear them. Remind me of funerals.'

I had, needless to say, heard it all before and now, as always, failed to understand why white should have this illogical, melancholy association. But there it was. Illogical or not, it had deeply permeated the heart and consciousness of my hostess and would for ever remain.

As for myself I can only say that I grow more and more fond of white flowers as I grow older. Lovely as they are in their many individual forms I love them for their power to light up the garden. I am writing these words on an abysmally dark, rain-soaked morning when the colours of flowers are washed out or wreathed in wet mist. The only ones not to suffer from these afflictions are those of pure white. They shine through the gloom of rain with a remarkable candescence.

Where to begin with white? Lilies would seem to be the obvious starting point—not only arums but also those noble and so aptly-named Madonnas, so pure as to be almost saintly. But I also have a certain crackpot affection for white in roses. What lovelier thing than that old Hybrid Perpetual, Frau Karl Drushki? Or the ravishing Madame Alfred Carrière? Or the still older white *centifolia* with its flowers all crimped so as to give the effect of shells? Nor are there many better white roses in cultivation than the present-day Iceberg, so strong and prolific, its



People often ask us if our H. E. Bates is the H. E. Bates, the well-known author. The answer is yes! He is a prolific writer, and many of his novels and short stories have been made into films and TV plays.

The third volume of his autobiography, *The World in Ripeness*, was published at the end of last year (Michael Joseph, £3)



flowers having a merest flush of cream deep in the heart. Nobody is going to persuade me that any of these beauties inspire the slightest melancholy.

I go strongly too for white pinks and also white campanulas, both tall and dwarf. I also have considerable affection for a very old white lilac which came originally from my great-grandmother's garden. She was, when I was a small boy, well into her eighties and my impression is that the lilac was even older. Age hasn't diminished the power of my own tree to produce masses of white flower every spring.

No sooner has the ancient lilac given its tower of purest white than the philadelphus follow with theirs. And spanning the two of them comes my favourite magnolia, *M. denudata*, unblemished white, a tree of perfect chalice-shaped lamps, infinitely to be preferred to *M. soulangeana*, the one more often seen. When all these have gone come the eucryphas, all white again, of which *E. glutinosa* is the latest and best. White phloxes and white dahlias light up August and September, by which time the dear old Frau Karl Drushki will have begun her generous act of giving a second flowering.

And then the winter-spring whites: white crocus, Christmas roses, snow-drops, white violets, white hyacinths and, perhaps most elegant of all, the white lily-flowered tulips with their reflexed petals of serene grace. These are utter perfection and she would be a brave woman who could throw those out of a window in my presence.

Little acts of transformation sometimes occur to give white where white never was. The old pink-purple honesty will sometimes throw up white progeny, a mystery which has also happened in my garden with another old favourite, the silver-leaved pink *lychnis*. This accidental treasure looks, from a distance, to be pure white, but closer inspection will show a wonderfully delicate stitchery of pink in the heart of the flower.

Many families of flowers either have no white or only whites of dubious kind. The white *Geranium dalmaticum* might be cut out of old newspaper and I have yet to see a really good white *penstemon*: I also await the day when someone will give us a really pure white day lily to join the many aristocrats in that happy family. □□

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