

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1974.

# A Countryman Remembers by H. E. Bates

## THE CHANGING SEASONS



H. E. Bates recalls a spring and summer long ago in the country of his childhood, when the seasons seemed more finely etched

Spring came too early, false with bursts of blue warmth in March, a bright glinting on brooks and river and the first spare primroses in copses after late falls of snow. The sun was soft on the greyish-yellow stone of the old tall houses of the square. The buds of chestnuts were varnished bright bronze with strokes of emerald.

In the garden a solitary daffodil, green cased in the morning, had by the afternoon opened like a yellow green skirt in the heat of the day. All spring and even a hint of summer were there in the free warm odour of the single flower. On the crests of hawthorn hedges there was a touch or two of full green, brilliant and fresh as parsley, and a few white stars of blossom gleamed on leafless boughs of blackthorn. Everywhere in the spring heat there was a great throbbing of thrush song and over on the big dry wheatfields a background of larks that went shrilling higher and higher into the blue March above the tender curves of corn.

From high up on the flattish lands above the valley it was possible to see the spires of nine churches, like pale stone swords. On the edges of the coverts the stalks of primroses were already long and pink and hairy in the sun. A tip or two of scarlet burned on the larch boughs and a few trembling anemones, like white bells, were scattered about the broken dancing shade.

When the sun went down beyond the stone swords of the churches it set fire to a sky that for a long time smouldered with bronze and orange and a far high glow of pale pure green. In the clear blue spring twilight, when the branches were black again, there was still the one exposed voice of a thrush whistling madly against the darkness and the thin pure

echo of a solitary lark in the field below.

By the beginning of June the drying silt of the valley began to feed the grasses. All the meadows became with sweeps of moon daisies that were like repeated ways.

In the upper brooks, in iron-red marshes, cresses scattered rapidly, dark and thick, and hawthorn turned pale pink scattered itself on streams that were presently half hidden in elderflower and honeysuckle and arches of rose. Pickering the cresses became a kind of game in which the young men and girls chased each other, leaping from island to island of sedge. And when, inevitably, one slipped and fell in a brood of young wild duck would rise at the sound of laughter and hands slapping into marsh water.

Then for the rest of the afternoon they would lie on a stretch of higher ground, drying themselves in the sun, watching the green skein of young duck circling round and round the marsh with its pink boundaries of may-blossom bleaching and fading against a pure sky.

Because they loved the river and the marsh they knew every pike-hole and every place where bream and roach would feed and every spinney and bush and bank where wood duck and snipe and kingfisher would breed. They knew where the swans nested each year and watched for the cygnets. They knew which of the sloping banks—now thick with scarlet and yellow vetch—would later be clouded with hundreds of dancing butterflies so that it would seem that the bank itself was dancing.

Then gradually the great flat lake of silt-fed grass became one vast map of turning and drying hay. The full surge of summer rose in the meadow grass, thick-scented, and the crowns of may-blossom and wild rose along the sprawling hedgerows where, later, herds of cattle would pant, fly-blown, in the August shade.

By July the wheatfields were shoulder high and pale already with the first olive-blue flush before ripening. As the weeks passed the thick-horned wheat grew and browned and curled. Sunshades of pink convolvulus winked at the edges of the wall of wheat where they crept and twined under the sun. Withered leaves of thistle were half silver, half rusty. Cracks in the clay were wide enough to swallow some of the big brown pebbles that lay everywhere under the cane-yellow straw.

Until, in August, came the harvest.

It began with mornings of thin soft cloud that cleared before noon into days that shimmered with heat, in silence under blue-white skies. From the cottoned valley the white mist of summer drew off rapidly, leaving a river low and sluggish in scorched meadows, bright as opaque glass.

All along the white central valley, so far from the valley heat locked itself in, burning windlessly on cracked lands, over brown burnt beanfields and on acres of blighted wheat and whiter barley.

The men struck into the wheatfields every morning at five o'clock. As the heat of morning rose they put pieces into their mouths and sucked them against the thirst of the day. They worked in a diagonal line and after them, hungry and concentrated, women raked the rows of fallen wheat sheaves that the other women tied. The scythed ends of thick wheatstalks were like sharpened quill-pens: they stung the women's fingers as they bonded them and soon their arms were raw. But the winter's bread was there. The weather was right for harvest and there was no time to delay.

*Extracts from 'The Feast of July', a novel by H. E. Bates published by Michael Joseph Ltd.*

