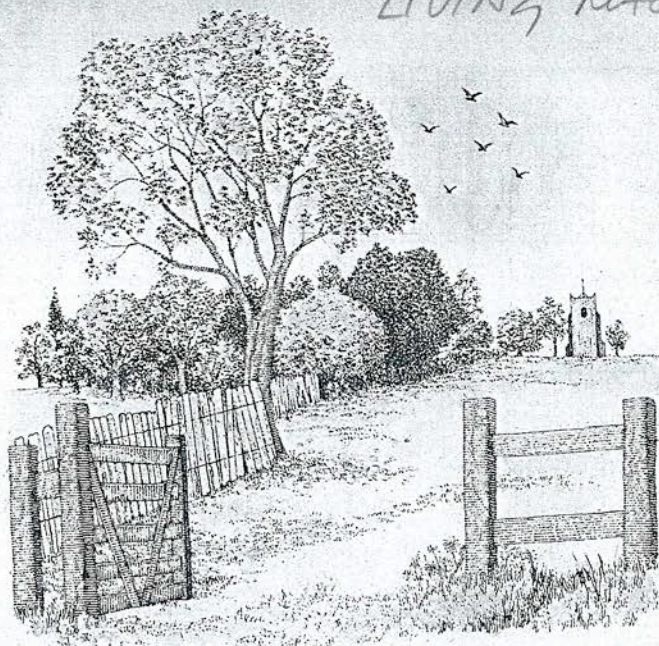


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A Countryman Remembers by H. E. Bates

Excursion to the Woods

I was born and brought up in a woodless country, almost a treeless country. It was not until we got out to a distance of about six or seven miles that we got to country that could be called wood, a country of immense estates and immense mansions, where the ridings of the wood were kept almost as neat as suburban lawns.

Today, it is an absurdly modest excursion, a journey of ten minutes or so, but in my childhood it was an excursion into another world, a colossal adventure. It was never undertaken lightly. It needed much preparation. It took time. It took us the better part of a morning to get there, what with the stops at this pub and that garden fence and the stops to let the horse wind and make water or the stops to let him drink water and make wind, and it took us, for the same reasons, the better part of an evening to get back. We never went for less than a day and we were lucky if we went more than twice a year. That journey was in fact as important to us as a Cabinet crisis or a coronation and we prepared ourselves for it as against storm and drought and starvation.

Actually there was not the slightest need for these industrious preparations against famine since we were in fact going to the house of my Uncle Silas, who would have exactly the same fears for our starvation as we had ourselves.

My Uncle Silas was the living flesh and blood brother-in-law of my maternal grandmother and, among other things, the biggest reprobate who ever lived.

He was a short almost dwarfish man with a devilish face made doubly devilish by one bloodshot eye. He was extremely ugly, as cunning as a wagon-load of monkeys and as wicked as sin itself. He drank too much and he was very old and the older he got the worse he got.

An operation at seventy-five might, you would think, have impeded, if not killed, him. Actually it seemed to rejuvenate him and he went gaily on to live another fifteen years of

aggravated wickedness and cunning. Time merely ripened him: he was indeed almost too ripe.

One of the greatest of his few virtues was that he was a marvellous gardener. He grew things that no one else did, and grew them better, bigger, earlier and more cunningly. If you could get round or over or under Uncle Silas as a gardener, you could beat the Devil himself.

Uncle Silas's small garden lay under the shelter of a wood and it was that wood which was for us the symbol of the journey. It was the first wood I ever knew and it was a paradise of a million primroses. They grew everywhere, often attracting many small birds about them all through the wood and outside of it, very big and noisy in that black earth. We took baskets to gather them and with them many big white violets and countless rosy-anemones. Later in the year came the bluebells and later still in the first weeks of June, the moon daisies that were like milk all along the woodside, and the meadow-sweet like the cream of summer.

The wood stretched from the very door of the house to the very brink of a railway cutting and every five minutes or so the woods were shattered by the sound of passing trains—a strange exhilarating sound, a mad roar of soot smashing and echoing against a thousand branches. Although it the wood seemed unearthly in its quietness, the padding of rabbits almost comically soft, the scream of a blackbird no more than the squeak of a toy doll.

Later still in the year we came to that wood for strawberries. I see them now, as I have not seen them since: little fiery scarlet hearts in the summer-scorched leaves, sweet as sugar. And then later still, but more rarely, we came for nuts. But somehow by then the best of the wood had gone. There were no nests. The nightingale had long since been silent. Only the garden was rich, almost exotic, with fruit and flower: black elderberries wine-dark on the woodside, yellow apples falling, great scarlet dahlias shining like dying suns against the dark trees. If it rained as it often did, we could only sit in the house and listen to my Uncle Silas telling some devilish tale that was probably all lies and gaze at his vast collection of birds' eggs hanging about the walls on long strings, like strange heathen talismans. In autumn no one wanted the woods and I walked there alone.

They were a world in themselves, a world that to a child was slightly forbidding and discomforting, the smell of the wood alone tranquillising, the old soft sweetness of wood and the odour that only comes from the timeless decay of old trees in almost sunless places, the black scent of ceaseless growing and dying and fermentation. It was a smell that in spring I did not notice. It was there, but the sweetness of primrose and bluebell somehow changed or effaced it. But in autumn at the damp turn of the year, it was powerful everywhere. It was almost the wood itself, a dark and some way exhilarating drug that was its very spirit.

That scent of wood is almost hypnotic. In those days it put me into a dream—until the passionate blare of the dahlias or the sound of Silas's voice or the smell of the smoke broke the spell at last.

It broke: but not completely and not for ever. It returns: if I shut my eyes it returns: the evocation of a whole world, a whole world of wood darkness and flowers and birds and late summer silence, of a million leaves turning themselves to death. It becomes then more than the mere memory of a wood, the first and the best. It is the redistillation of another and more lovely world.

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