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A day stolen from April



by H.E. Bates

I often think that that much-maligned institution, the British climate, deserves a better reputation. I thought of it more especially on Christmas Day 1972, when a year reputed to be the driest for fifty years lay behind us. The day dawned from behind long, unfurling curtains of light cloud, purest pink against an already rich blue sky. As this pink faded, leaving the clouds to disperse, the morning became all brilliant unblemished gold and the air like spring.

By the house wall the branches of *Hamamelis mollis* were all alight with twisted stars of brightest yellow. This exquisite thing never fails to show its first flowers on or about the shortest day and now it was more than half way to its fullest beauty.

It wasn't the only shrub coming to full bloom, *Prunus subhirtella* had already been blooming for a week or two, its pale pink blossoms as exquisite as a Chinese painting. This tree has the admirable virtue of being able to go back to sleep if the weather turns really cold and then of waking up, in renewed glory, when it turns mild once again.

Close by it were more yellow stars, those of our friend the winter jasmine,

Jasminum nudiflorum.

Underneath this was a thirty foot row of *Iris stylosa*, its many flowers like delicate mauve orchids—surely the loveliest of all the things that our maligned climate offers us from November to April. Almost as exquisite were a few heads of nerines, a pure white one, still blooming as bravely as if it were summer. Close by them were two other unfailing beauties, *Crocus laevigatus* and the first of the winter aconites. The little stars of the crocus, almost the same colour as the irises, had already been coaxed open by the sun.

These were only the beginning of the winter joys. I still hadn't come to *Mahonia bealei*, with its handsome holly-like foliage and its long racemes of yellow flower, almost exactly like lily of the valley in perfume. It was slightly ahead of two other delightful things, a pink *Cydonia japonica*, its buds still less than half open, and that monumental mass of architectural foliage, *Helleborus corsicus*, whose big heads of lime green flowers were still like tight-clenched fists.

Strangely enough, one of the great winter beauties, *Virburnum fragrans*, was already over. Its full glory had been in October and November. But half a dozen kinds of heather had already overtaken both hellebore and cydonia: dense masses of pink, white and crimson, surely one of winter's most precious gilt-edged investments. Scattered about them were many things that I don't really count as truly winter joys: polyanthus, odd pinks and a few precocious sprigs of wallflowers. But among them was at least one astonishing surprise—gold and yellow heads of gazania, miraculously untouched by frost.

So a morning filched from April wasn't cheating. Its joys were all genuine.

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1/2 lb. ground almonds
1/2 lb. caster sugar
1/2 lb. water
1/2 lb. egg yolks
1/2 lb. almond essence
1/2 lb. gelatine
1/2 lb. water
1/2 lb. 5.6 oz. cartons na
1/2 lb. white
1/2 lb. double cream
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