

Perfick Weaver

SUE GEE

It is a glorious afternoon in May. In the cab of his gentian-blue truck, with six children licking enormous ice creams in the back, skinny little Pop Larkin, crammed next to enormous Ma, starts the engine and drives along Kentish lanes lined with apple orchards and strawberry fields. As he approaches home he is, as so often, in a state of complete contentment.

The dusty yard in which he pulls up is a happy muddle of nettles, scrap iron and poultry. There are also two horses, belonging to Mariette, his eldest daughter and his darling, an exquisitely slender 17-year-old in jodhpurs and lemon shirt, 'black-haired, soft-eyed, olive-skinned' – and, he has just learned from Ma, expecting a baby. It is she who draws Pop's attention to a man standing by the horse-box, watching them.

The Inland Revenue has come to call. Its pale young representative produces from his briefcase a buff form.

Things are about to change – but not, it transpires, for Pop. It is pale, nervous, desk-bound Mr Charlton – Cedric, but no one can bring themselves to call him that – whose old life now begins to unravel, as the form and all attendant questions are breezily waved aside. Already entranced by the sight of Mariette, he is invited into the kitchen. A gorgeous tea is set before him. Children crowd round, geese gobble scraps beneath the table, Ma, 'huge as a buffalo', pre-

H. E. Bates, *The Darling Buds of May* (1958)

Penguin • Pb • 144pp • £8.99 • ISBN 9780141029672

The Vanished World (1969) is out of print.

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sides, washing everything down with Guinness. The room is lit by the 'pallid, unreal glow' of the television. Briefly, it is switched off.

In the half-darkness that now smothered the room, Mr Charlton felt something smooth, sinuous and slender brush against his right calf. For one shimmering, unnerving moment he sat convinced that it was Mariette's leg entwining itself about his own.

He looks down, sees a goose eating half-cold chips, and struggles to return to the question of income.

'Six kids to feed and clothe,' Pop said. 'This place to run. Fodder to buy. Wheat as dear as gold-dust . . . Vet's fees. Fowl pest. Foot-and-mouth. Swine fever. Income, old man? *Income?* I should like some, old man.'

And then, since the chips and fresh pineapple are too much for Mr Charlton's delicate stomach, Mariette is making soft-boiled eggs, laid on a plate 'embroidered with the thinnest white bread-and-butter', and Pop is speaking of the nearby woods where the bluebells are 'fick as carpets, ficker in fact', and before very long Mr Charlton finds himself invited first to Sunday lunch and then on a woodland walk with Mariette, now changed into a delicious summer frock.

On the path, lit by the broken gold of evening sunlight, he stands listening to an outburst of passionate birdsong. Mariette turns to him, takes his face in her hands. 'A moment later, he saw her lips upraised.'

Within days, the buff form bites the dust, and the chaps in the office and the 'vast and frightful' papers on his desk are forgotten. Pale Mr Charlton takes sick leave, grows brown and fit, and succumbs to paradise.

* * *

Herbert Ernest Bates was born in 1905, in Northamptonshire, the son of a cobbler, and his schooldays were spent in a brick-terraced

industrial town dominated by factories where he dreaded he would one day have to work. But his Methodist childhood was lit up by visits to his grandfather's farm, and the early chapters of his memoir *The Vanished World* (1969) are full of his love of the Midlands countryside.

Every morning was golden; even the First World War had not begun. The hedgerows of spring were clothed with the cream of May-blossom; those of June and July with pink and white dog-roses, meadow-sweet and willow-herb . . . Sticklebacks were in the brook, cuckoos called from the elms, yellowhammers swooned away long summer afternoons in lanes shimmering with heat . . .

The Darling Buds of May, published in 1958, is suffused with just such lyrical descriptions, and in his reconnection with a longed-for vanished world Bates produced a minor classic. Of all his novels, and he published at least twenty, with many more short-story collections, this – dramatized on ITV in the early Nineties – is the work which everyone knows and loves.

Like Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*, Mr Charlton is a fellow whose horizons need broadening, and, as with Mole, they are well and truly broadened. Like Toad, with whom he shares a love of the good life and a disdain for practicalities, Pop is a one-off. And Larkin-land is quintessential English countryside at its loveliest. Beneath a flax-blue sky, brimming hedgerows run alongside fields full of rising oats and barley, the hot summery distances are full of calling cuckoos, the woods of nightingales, the night sky of 'young unquenchable summer stars'.

Into this setting happiness pours like honey: through Ma, 'shaking like a jelly' every time she laughs, which is often; through Pop, never without a lethal cocktail, or a wad of notes, never without a scheme or a purchase – a yellow Rolls-Royce, complete with speaking tube, appears in the junk yard over this weekend; through the falling in

love of Mr Charlton and Mariette (who turns out not to be pregnant after all, though someone else is) and in the endless, lavish meals to which the less fortunate inhabitants of the village are liberally invited.

These include tweedy Edith Pilchester, kissed once by Pop at a Christmas party and keen to repeat the experience, and the poor old Brigadier, all frayed cuffs and holey socks, in 'a pair of crumpled corduroys the colour of a moulting stoat', who lives with a commanding sister on milk and Marmite sandwiches. When he creeps over to confide his anxieties about the Gymkhana – Bolshie Fortescue has pulled out of the Committee, pulling his field with him – Pop has it sorted in a flash: they can have his medder, he'll get it mown.

And after a couple of strong snifters, the Brigadier, alongside Mr Charlton, sits down to an al fresco Sunday lunch of roast goose, peas, beans, asparagus, two kinds of potato and Yorkshire pudding, sage and onions, apple sauce and gravy. Mole and Ratty never had it better.

There are mouth-watering meals, and if a Good Sex Award had existed in the Fifties, Bates would surely have won it. Pop in bed on a summer evening, lovingly eyeing Ma's mountains of flesh beneath a transparent nylon nightie; Mr Charlton dissolving as Mariette sits lightly and exquisitely on his lap in a cloud of gardenia scent; their sinking down together in the buttercup field beyond the woods – rarely has desire been rendered so magically. As for the plot, which culminates in (among other things) fireworks, a party after the Gymkhana, and Pop's appalling scheme to turn a country pile to scrap – it is, like the weather, perfick.

I inherited a 1958 second impression of this lovely book from my mother. The jacket is smothered in pink blossom; the yellow Rolls-Royce stands in the yard amongst hens and oil drums; washing flaps gaily on the line. The blurb speaks happily of the 'uninhibited moral code' of the Larkins, facing life 'as many of us would like to face it if we dared'. In the climate of the late Fifties, with the war and rationing not so very far away, this was doubtless true. Read now, in the wake of Sixties excess, and in times of new austerity, with the

head of Cameron's 'troubled families unit' chiding feckless women for having too many children, such words sound touchingly innocent, and no less beguiling for that.

My parents adored the novel, as do I. I can still hear my father's roars of laughter as my mother read passages aloud – he particularly liked Ma in her nylon nightie. For all of us it represented the country life we had left when he got a new job in London – carefree happiness, hens round the back door, the mournful old Brigadier: perhaps there was one of those in every Fifties village.

My mother, a compulsive writer who longed above all else to be published, finally wrote to H. E. Bates in 1970 asking his advice, and he responded generously in a hand-written letter. He commended the power of imagination above observation, told her that 'the craft of words must be learned like any other craft – the hard way!' and went on: 'Why not be courageous and send your love affair story to my agent . . . She will give you really professional advice. Even if she didn't want to publish your story she would tell you if your writing had the right sort of style and promise.'

Alas, the agent did not take her on, and the 'love affair story' never saw the light of day, but my mother tucked his letter into the book, and it remains there still.

The Darling Buds of May makes an appearance on a bedside table in SUE GEE's new novel, *Coming Home*, about her parents' return from India in 1947. With luck, it will see the light of day next year.

A Late Victorian Afternoon

MARK JONES

They seemed reasonable enough requests. Don't lie on the bed naked in case passing servants catch an eyeful. Also, in mixed company, could he try to swear only in French? Modest pleas made by Theodore Watts-Dunton to the poet and ex-libertine Algernon Charles Swinburne when they first set up home together. It was 1879 and Swinburne's relish for brandy and flagellation had reached a critical point. In the nick of time, Watts-Dunton, the gallant walrus-moustached solicitor-turned-author, had plucked his friend from the depths and carried him off for a spot of detox in Putney.

The house to which they retreated for the next thirty years lends its name to a witty and evocative book about their lives together. *At the Pines* by Mollie Panter-Downes, first published in 1971, tells, in discursive and observant prose, the story of an intimate if unimpeachably platonic alliance which blossomed in high-ceilinged, over-furnished rooms between two Victorian bachelors.

A contributor to *The New Yorker* for fifty years, Panter-Downes was a Londoner whose pithy reportage of wartime life in the capital first established her reputation as wielder of the skilful phrase and the sardonic punch-line. Although she is nowadays somewhat unjustly forgotten, her considerable body of work (poems, short stories, novels) almost unfailingly invites the reader to relax into the subject in question, assured that this is a writer as able to hold her audience on the metaphysics of rationing as she is on the household by-laws of late nineteenth-century domesticity.

Mollie Panter-Downes, *At the Pines* (1971), is out of print.