

England's Woods from April to April

THROUGH THE WOODS: The English Woodland, April to April. By H. E. Bates. With 73 Engravings on Wood by Agnes Miller Parker. 142 pp. New York: The Macmillan Co. \$3.

AN English wood is a little thing—a lovable thing, like an English garden, for all the untrammelled natural wildness that is a part of its very loveliness. The English wood “never dominates, never assumes the dark dictatorship of forests”; beyond the ancient oaks and tall beeches one will come soon to harvest fields, or upland reaches, or perhaps the sea. But within the wood, with its intimacy, its “variation of trees, its many flowers and bird-voices,” life holds a manifold beauty and suggestiveness, stimulus and enchantment. And all the time. “It has its own special atmosphere. . . . It has no single minute of eclipse throughout the year. . . . It is the most constantly beautiful object about the countryside.”

To that constant beauty, that quick and lovely life, H. E. Bates and Agnes Miller Parker pay worthy tribute in beauty of word and of picture. “Through the Woods,” which follows the woodland from springtime to springtime around the year, is a companion volume to Clare Leighton’s “Four Hedges,” which was brought out by the same publishing house a year ago in the same format.

“Through the Woods” is a rare and lovely, and at the same time

an oddly universal, book. This chronicle of the months in an English woodland touches, somehow, a deep common note, not only of appreciation, but of kinship with all the loveliness and freedom and sure procession of nature everywhere. And the beauty of Mr. Bates’s writing casts his chronicle in terms of quiet, gentle witchery. Here, in April, is the Spring awaking, the wood’s “between-time, half bud, half leaf.” And in May the wild trees are all a-flower: in cream and white and pink—save only for the broom’s “little passionate tongues of yellow,” and the gorse whose blossoms flame or flicker all through the year. Then, soon, the wood is alive with bird-song, and flowers are everywhere. But by June midsummer’s great change has fallen upon the woodland and its creatures; and in July “the silence is beginning, and the flowerlessness,” to be followed soon by the “first fusing of Summer and Autumn” in field and hedgerow and wood. When the real Autumn comes, in October, “the woods are at their best again.” After the “year’s greatest and most furious piece of transformation,” the great storm that always comes in November, there is a new sort of loveliness in the Winter’s calm, in the absolute silence under snow; and in January the first tree-buds can be found, and it will soon be Spring

again; the February catkins are followed by the “darling buds of March.”

All this cycle of the year is not merely set down, but described with rare beauty and vividness of simple detail, so that you can feel the wood’s pervading life, in flower and bud and tree trunk, in the smell of Autumn, in the nightingale’s song and the soft midsummer coo of the pigeons. And there are people here, too—the gamekeepers whom Mr. Bates detests, the poachers he understands, his aunt who kept a pub, his children on a picnic. The book, like the woodland, is always alive. And the constant beauty of the wood is in these pages, and in the detailed perfection of their wood-cuts.



From a Wood Engraving by Agnes Miller Parker for “Through the Woods.”