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Full Summer

BY JULY nightingale and cuckoo have finished their season, and the month comes in full of the slumbrous broken moaning of wood-pigeons in the great canopies of sun-metallic leaves. I say broken advisedly. It is broken, this pigeon-calling; it ceases abruptly on a phrase and then after an interval, sometimes a long interval, begins where it left off,—*coo coo-coo coo-coo, coo-ooo, coo-coo, coo*—as though the bird were cooling itself into a constant day-sleep in the drowsy branches. Of all notes it is the note of high summer. It has in it the monotonous soothing drowsiness of a high noon. There is something in it that deepens and stupefies the silence of the day. With it, the year seems to drop off into a lull. There comes a feeling of oh! let it go, don't worry, sit still, have five minutes in the shade, let it go, a feeling that nothing matters. The climax has been reached, the year stands still.

In the woods that feeling is more acute than almost anywhere else. There is a kind of enervating airlessness, almost a stifling and dragging, wherever there are great masses of trees in July. It is as though—perhaps actually because—the air has been sucked up by a million leaves. W. H. Hudson himself noticed this and had some comments on it in relation to the New Forest, where he felt that that great expanse of trees seemed to suck up all energy and leave the mind and body as flabby as a sponge. He pointed out how pale the Hampshire people of that district looked, as though they were literally robbed of air. The New Forest has affected me in that way as early as May, long before the leaves are at their thickest, leaving me with a feeling of drowsy gloom, turning at last into antipathy, into a feeling that I hated those vast tracts of trees and must escape from them.

AND HERE, IT seems to me, is much of the secret of the choice of woods in England. A wood should never be vast. The best woods are small, a few acres in extent, not much more than copses. The word forest creates in the mind a feeling of grandeur and of something primeval. In actuality one can't get hold of it. Its vastness is at once forbidding and elusive. It goes on and on like the vast bulk of an unread book. It is a *tour de force*, but one can't be bothered to go right through it. And forests, like heavy redound books, so often go on and on in an endless repetition of the same thing, of trees all looking alike, never breaking, only going on and on in their own darkness. In Germany the forest, as one sees it going by in the train, stretches away like a kingdom of potential telegraph poles; and the straight pines, so beautiful at first, get gradually monotonous and then more monotonous and at last unbearable. One longs for a break, a change for some treeless opening on which the mind can rest. The whole effect is altogether too vast and illimitable. One stands awed by a forest, but one has no affection for it. There is some kind of baffling insoluble mystery about it, a primeval darkness, a secret heart that one can never get at. Many Russian writers have written of that curious, powerful sense of profound mysteriousness which forests create. They have even made it beautiful, with the result that Russian literature is full of beautiful forests, just as it is full of beautiful girls. But these forests only exist on paper, and there are worlds of difference, for me at any rate, between the idealized forests of prose and the forests of actuality. I can love one, but not the other.

WHEREAS, AS I see it, prose can never overrate the wood: the small intimate English wood with its variation of trees, its many flowers and bird-voices, its feeling of being only a part but never the whole of a country-

side. It never dominates, never assumes the dark dictatorship of forests. You can walk in it and through it and round it without a sense of oppression, a sense of its being too great for you. At the same time its life is quick and, at its best, stimulating and entrancing. It is never dormant. It is only in July that it is caught up in that lull of drugged sleepiness, of birdless noons, in the brief vacuum of high summer.

Even then there will be life going on about it, because it happens that in England corn fields and hay fields are always appearing in the heart of woods, and woods in the middle of arable and pasture country. And it is a fine thing, in July, to wander down a wood path and come suddenly upon fields full of great greenish-white seas of hay or of green corn like placid lakes that wash right up to the very foot of the woodland. Out of the wood, life moves at its height. The sun stabs down with naked spears of heat, fierce under the windlessness of the thick trees, burning out the scent of hay; or later, in August, the hot sweet smell of corn and stubble and sun-cracked earth, of binder oil and tractor fumes, all the smells of animation, of man in contact with the earth, and of man and earth in contact with the sun. It is a life almost as far removed from the life of the wood as night from day. In the wood, on the fiercest noons, there is a coldness and stillness and shadowiness under the trees, so that the land all about is like the camping ground of a vast army just pitching tents. It is the first fusing of summer and autumn: of stalk and stubble, green sloe and blue, the seed and fingers of honeysuckle, red blackberry and black, and, in the woods, of the green and yellow of full leaf.

It is not much, but it is there, the first sign: a vein of yellow, a mere peppering of bronze, nothing. It is no more noticeable than the solitary gray hairs of a man in full maturity. The woods still look solid and powerful and lush. They stand as though eternal, carved imperishably out of some vast block of everlasting greenheart. They seem, against the yellow and copper and white of harvest fields, as evergreen as holly or bay. They take the quick change interludes of August without ever seeing the change themselves. The earth tires visibly under the sun, the grassland is arid; or the wheat lies swamped and smashed under the rollers of storm. But nothing affects the woods. They stand about the landscape with the gloomy solidity of monuments.

As always, they have their beauty. But in August it is somber. It has lost the quickness and light of youth. It is then that woods by water come into their own, woods by quick-moving brooks, woods by placid-moving and water-lilled rivers, and, finest of all, woods by the sea. They are not common. The coast, in England, is anybody's playground, and we are a nation, not of shopkeepers, but of jerry-builders, masters of the art of destroying what we most profess to love. And ironically enough, the English coast is well suited to this vandalism. Its flats and headlands and lawn-covered cliffs are paradises for those who make profits out of the common human desire for escape—that out-of-nowhere-into-nothing kind of escape which drives people from jerry-built towns inland to jerry-built towns by the sea. Had the English coast been wooded and had it, more important, been held in trust for everlasting for the nation and its people, I might now be writing a chapter on its unique glory. But woods by the English sea are rarities. I rejoice whenever I see them, which is not often. The spaces for woods along the English coast line, never vast, are being crushed out of existence; and with them, if it comes to that, the spaces for field and hedge and farm and tree and stream. Here, as inland, the English are playing with masterly stupidity the game of picking their own pockets.

WHAT WOODS THERE still are, therefore, by the English sea, will not be sanctuaries of untrampled quietness in August. But that combination of trees and sea is still irresistible: the trees running down thickly by gorge and stream-valley to the very edge of sand and rock, the trees themselves bent into the savage toughened shapes of lop-sided umbrellas, as though flattened back by some colossal flat-iron of storm and wind. And far below, beyond the trees, the sea shining with that flashing-sun-hard glitter of August, making a mind-drowsy distance of water and light, the silence under the stunted trees broken by the everlasting break of waves and the mewing of gulls and the sudden paper-rustling sound of small sea winds, eddying and dying in trees and in invisible sea-pinked clefts of cliff somewhere out of sight.