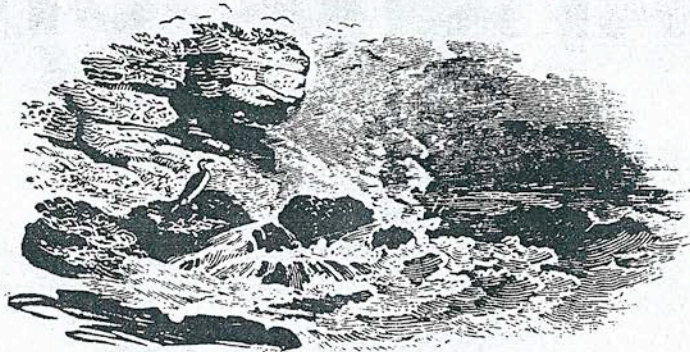


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SUMMER HEAT

by H. E. Bates



The coast in England is anybody's playground. 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 towns inland to towns by the sea.

Had the English coast been wooded and had it, more important, been held in trust everlasting for the nation and its people, then 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, but it is not often.

What woods there are by the English sea may 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 lopsided umbrellas, as though flattened 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 sea-pinked clefts of cliff somewhere out of sight.

Out of the wood, life moves at its height. The sun stabs down with naked spears of heat, burning out the scent of hay or, in August, the hot, sweet smell of corn and stubble and sun-cracked earth, of horse sweat and man sweat and binder oil and tractor fumes, all the smells of animation, of man in contact with the earth, 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 that is like a momentary oasis of death.

It is almost a relief to get out into the open again, to see the sky, to be stabbed by heat, to see green corn or yellow corn or hay or dark metallic-leaved acres of roots, shining like tropical plants in the sun. In early August, from outside, the wood is best as a dark tree-background to the low curtain of almost copper wheat or of the pale green, not yet straw-hat coloured, barley.

And soon afterwards there comes a great time, the best of all in the English late summer, when corn is half-cut everywhere, some cut and lying in sheaf, some standing in ear and some in shock, so that the land all about is like the camping ground of a vast army just pitching its 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 and dying.

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 grey hairs of a man in full maturity. The trees 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. 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 trees: they stand about the landscape with the gloomy solidity of monuments.

Summer and autumn fuse into each

other imperceptibly, the point of fusion lost in some period of mild wonder of too-soft days. Autumn will come slowly and go on slowly, for a long time. In a country of many trees, such as ours, where one kind turns its colours while another holds them fast, where some are stripped while others are summered with leaf, it is never easy to make the mark between season and season.

But even the green now has the yellow flame in it. The trees in the lane, more birch and oak than anything, will soon smoulder into a continual cloud of yellow and, on the hills, the great structures of beech and larch turn to vast dayfires of copper and orange—all flame except for the plaything tufts of wild clematis seed tangled on the outer edges of the wood, little sheep-wool tufts of still smoke that even the rage of winter will never blow away.

As the month draws on there is not only a change in the feeling of the days but in the habit of them. The fox lies bored to death, summer sick, not yet roused to the heat of mating passion, in hidden holes under the oak roots in wood and spinney.

Against the quivering sweet heat of open stubbles the wood seems damp and in it, already, there is a breath of the faint odours of autumn. Squirrels are everlastingly lively among the oaks and pines, but underfoot there is a flabby extinction of a million bluebell spikes, fat-seeded. Even the trees have lost the quickness and light of youth.

It is then that woods by the water come into their own, woods by quick-moving brooks, woods by placid-moving and water-lilied rivers—and finest of all, if we can but find them, woods by the sea.

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