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Author: Sackville-West, Vita [Victoria Mary] (1892-1962)

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V. Sackville-West

COUNTRY NOTES IN WARTIME

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FIRST EDITION

FOREWORD

These country notes were first published in *The New Statesman and Nation*.

I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the permission given me by the editor to reprint them in book form.

V. S.-W.

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COUNTRY NOTES IN WARTIME

BELATED HAYSEL

August 1939

A few nights ago I was out scything and raking a late crop of grass in the orchard. The harvest moon came up behind the apple trees, so although the daylight had come to its end the moonlight enabled me to continue with my task. We do not usually bother to collect this second lot of grass, too coarse for fodder, but in this year of threatened war every scrap should be worth the saving. I was alone, and the world seemed very gentle. The scythe slid regularly through the long grass, laying the swaths quite neatly for so inexpert a mower, like fesses across a heraldic field; and, mixing poetry, war and blazon in my mind, I thought of Marvell:

*Thus, ye Meadows, which have been
Companions of my thoughts more green,
Shall now the Heraldry become
With which I shall adorn my Tomb.*

I had no wish to adorn my tomb, only to supply free bedding for my cows; still, the conceit pleased me. The spirit of Marvell came very near: not only did ripe apples drop about my head with big thuds into the grass, falling from sheer maturity, although not the frailest breeze arrived to stir the moonlight—*Kaum einen Hauch*—but the scythe occasionally sliced through one of them with a juicy sound which would certainly have touched the fancy of my most delectable poet. It was a lovely, lonely task, physically satisfying as well as mentally. Mentally it soothed me, as all true rhythm soothes; physically it satisfied me by producing new muscles in my body, the pleasant pain of new muscular effort in arms and back and thighs, a pleasurable pain that made me feel like Constantine Levine at the end of his day's mowing: "You would hardly believe what a remedy it is for every kind of folly ... such pleasant work, and at the same time so hard that one has no time for thinking ... and there is nothing wrong in it."

There was nothing wrong in it; everything in it seemed smooth and useful until the wedge dropped out of the scythe and I couldn't find it anywhere to knock it in again. This is a thing which does easily happen with scythes, when the blade swivels round and points impertinently at the sky. It is irritating as a rule, but on this occasion I welcomed the excuse to stop working, hitched armoured scythe and wooden rake back into the branches of a tree and went away, leaving them there to dangle throughout the night among the yellow apples.

LILIES AND LAKES

Because I was restless and had no desire to seek the sleep which would certainly have eluded me, I went down to the lake where the black water gave a sense of deepest peace. The water happened to be peculiarly inky that night, bright though the moon was. Anyone closely familiar with a piece of water knows how unexpected and unaccountable its reflective moods are; how, on one night when you would expect light to pour down into its mirror from above, no light returns; how, on another night when the heavens are darkened, a mysterious lucency gleams with no contribution from overhead. On this particular night the moon gave no reflection into the darkened waters. The only things which gleamed and glowed were the water lilies, whitely nesting on the black pool. Taking the boat out, I cut the milky stalks of the

lilies in the moonlight, and as I did so, drifting, aeroplanes appeared over the lake, chased by the angular beams of searchlights, now lost, now found again, now roaring out, now silent, traceable only by their green and red lights sliding between the stars. A fox barked at them, like something in a fable curiously up to date. I tried to compose the fable for myself, something which would combine the fox, the lilies and the white bodies of the young men up there aloft, but nothing neat would come to me although in that lonely hour I felt that they were all invested with an extraordinary significance. I remembered only how, many years ago, I had first seen an aeroplane flying by night; its engines were shut off, and all that could be discerned was one golden light travelling with silent and terrible velocity, like a planet broken loose. Indeed, in that first moment of horror I had thought to see Jupiter making for the Earth. This time it was with a different dismay that I watched the lights above—the fanlike sticks of the searchlights, the tumbling acrobatics of the pursued.

The fox barked again, and carrying the inert lily buds, I made my way across the fields. The homely weapon of the scythe shone all along the blade where I had left it hanging among the fruit.

SEPTEMBER 1939

With the prospect of devastation hanging over us, the impression of fecundity produced by the countryside during the past fortnight strikes one as painfully ironical. All crops seemed to come to fruition at once: the corn, the apples and the hops. These things happen every year, but this year one noticed them more keenly than usual. For one thing, a number of the ordinary farm workers had been called away to grimmer jobs, and their place was taken by amateur improvised labour. Skinny little boys from London raked the chaff and cavings from under the threshing machine; handsome, elegant young men waiting to be put into uniform heaved trusses of straw from cart to stack; schoolboys climbed into apple trees and picked, for once legitimately, the huge green cookers into bushel baskets. Everything hummed with liveliness; the thresher hummed; so did the drying fans in the oasthouse; there was a constant burr from stackyard and oasts; the air smelt of hops; dust motes flew about; large horses stood waiting patiently between the shafts of larger wagons; peaches and nectarines on the wall ripened so rapidly that the blush came over them as over the cheeks of a girl; figs turned as brown as Syrian sailors. A sudden hurry woke the somnolent farm to life; everyone took a hand, grateful for the physical activity which puts a stop to thought; everything bore its own particular fruit. This teeming effect has been increased by the quantities of extra London children straying all over the place, as though country families were inordinately prolific. Swinging on gates, smeared with blackberry juice in the lanes, they have turned the country into a warren. Some of them, I understand, are not too popular with their hosts and hostesses. There is one story of two little boys, left behind to play while the farmer and his household went out to work; on his return he found a cloud of feathers and a squawking barnyard full of completely naked fowls. Decidedly, being in the country is great fun.

Then there are the land girls, an unfamiliar sight in the orchards and among the cows, picturesque in their brown dungarees, tossing their short curls back and laughing. I came across two of them picking plums; very young they were, and standing under the tree loaded with the blood-red drops, their arms lifted, the half-filled baskets on the ground beside them, they could scarcely have looked prettier in their lives than on that sunlit morning.

BLACK-OUT

In contrast to the sunlit days came the starlit nights. I could imagine nothing more desirable and mysterious than these black secret nights, were it not for the sinister intention behind them. I suppose that one should not allow the intention to impair one's appreciation of this new beauty of the starry night. The moon has gone, and nothing but stars and three planets remain within our autumn sky. Every evening I go my rounds like some night watchman to see that the black-out is complete. It is. Not a chink reveals the life going on beneath those roofs, behind those blinded windows;

love, lust, death, birth, anxiety, even gaiety. All is dark, concealed. Alone I wander, no one knowing that I prowl. It makes me feel like an animal, nocturnal, stealthy. I might be a badger or a fox. All voices are stilled as though by a hand laid over noisy mouths. The experience is a strange one, making me feel more like myself and more unlike myself, more closely united to those who share my roof yet more divorced from them, than ever I felt before. I think of all the farms and cottages spread over England, sharing this curious protective secrecy where not even a night light may show from the room of a dying man or a woman in labour.

The black-out is inconvenient to the men drying the hops from dusk to dawn. I stroll round to the oasts and find one door left open beneath the shadow of the staging. They have hung a green silk scarf over the central lamp so that the glaucous light of underseas tinges the lime-washed walls to the very colour of the hops themselves. War brings an unforeseen strangeness to these small interiors of illumination.

I continue on my rounds. The Londoners' children in the village are asleep by now in their improvised beds. The land girls, tired out, are asleep also, their brown dungarees exchanged for striped pajamas. The four young men whom I watched at supper, four boys at the beginning of lives possibly to be lost, the boys who slung the sheaves in early morning, are asleep also. All these people gathered under various roofs are asleep.

The place I love; the country I love; the boys I love. I wander round and towards midnight discover that the only black-out I notice is the black-out of my soul. So deep a grief and sorrow that they are not expressible in words.

YEOMAN CALLING

When one lives surrounded by simple people whose interest lies entirely in country things, it is a little startling to come suddenly across a page of statistics proving beyond question how urban-minded the population of this island may be made to appear. Startling, but no doubt salutary. I had grown too well accustomed to taking the country lovers for granted—the men who had "a way" with animals, the children with their odd little bits of country lore, the gardener handling a plant with tenderness and decision. Unthinking, I had begun to feel that life must revolve round country matters and that to divorce the Englishman from his fields and cotes was to bring a spiritual death upon him. I know better now. It seems that with a miserable seven per cent we have the smallest agricultural population in the world. It seems also that during the last eighteen years three hundred thousand men have deserted the land and that we could add a hundred million pounds a year in food production if we chose. We don't choose. Why?

The author of the illuminating study I have just been reading, *Yeoman Calling*, by Christopher Turner, is himself a practical farmer, a big landlord and an agricultural expert. In this treble capacity he might be expected to take the utilitarian point of view, advocating the abolition of what has always seemed to me the absurdly wasteful system of our farming and the creation of communal (or even nationalized) farms on the scale of Gigant. He does nothing of the sort. He never even mentions the extravagance (both of acreage and labour) of our small-field system with its hedgerows in need of annual attention, brishing and ditching, its limited range for the frequent turning of plough or tractor, its waste of headings which in the aggregate must amount to many thousands of acres, many gallons of petrol and many hours of time. None of these things does he decry. I myself, if I were an agricultural expert, a minister of agriculture or even a totalitarian dictator, would certainly and seriously consider the necessity for reforming our present system. To do so would go against all my personal instincts and all my love of the yeoman such as he still is. It would break my heart to see the familiar aspect of England altered from our toy-like fields into wide stretches of undivided land where the gyro tiller could churn the soil for two or three miles on end without coming to a turn. I should hate to see the yeomen swept away and replaced by so inhuman a thing as the communal overseer and the mechanized farm. Even so, I have always had a distressing suspicion that this is what we ought to do if the agricultural possibilities of our land were to be properly exploited.

It was a great comfort, therefore, to find a real expert in these matters implying that we need not and should not. If I were not convinced and assured that Mr Turner is impeccably a realist, I should incline to think him a sentimentalist. It is surprising to read such a paragraph as this in the middle of a book devoted to such dry facts as the pigs marketing

scheme, the Bacon Development Board, the potato marketing scheme and the Schultze-Delitsch credit system:

The land responds to human effort, in general terms, far more than to mechanical treatment ... the yield of the small farm, worked by the man and his family, is greater per acre than is the yield of the large farm, and livestock thrives best when handled by the man who owns it.

It is always unfair to lift a passage out of its context, and perhaps by quoting these few words out of a serious book I may annoy its author unduly. I quote them, however, as they raise an interesting point. What the author is really pleading for is a change of heart—a consummation easier to desire than to bring about, as many sincere Christians may have noticed in another connection. In short, he wants to see his countrymen becoming more country-minded. Being a practical man, he is not afraid to carry his argument to the logical conclusion which leads him to urge his countrywomen to insist on better vegetables in the allotments (he has seen the allotments worked by the dock labourers of Antwerp) and to learn how to cook them better. It seems too good to hope for. Still, if in one generation we can become air-minded, why despair of becoming country-minded again when we have all the tremendous tradition of agriculture behind us? It is no despicable profession.[*]

[*] Mr Turnor died in August 1940.

FARMING IN WARTIME

It will be instructive to see what permanent effect, if any, the necessities of war produce on that most conservative of mortals, the average English farmer. He was not too enthusiastic last summer when the Ministry of Agriculture wisely attempted to bribe him with the promise of £2 an acre subsidy into ploughing some of his poorer grassland, and now that the conversion of a proportion of grass into arable has become compulsory he is still inclined to be obstructive rather than helpful. Oddly enough, the small yeoman, the fifty- to one-hundred-acre man, proves himself more willing than his neighbour with the larger holding. For some reason the bigger farmer, who ought to give the example, puts every difficulty in the way: he ploughs because he must, but, having ploughed, sits back complacently with a certain *Schadenfreude*, saying that his new furrows are there, obediently waiting, but that he can't obtain the necessary seed and when is the government going to send it along? The obvious retort is, if the willing man can obtain it why can't the others? To this retort there seems to be no answer, except that they won't, don't want to, resent being dictated to, resent their routine arrangements being altered and take up a general attitude on the lines that if the government (that vague, inimical, tiresome, ignorant body comfortably settled in offices somewhere in Whitehall) insists on compelling a man to plough pasture he has never ploughed before, it is up to Government to supply the seed they want sown. If not, let the government look out for itself. If they won't give us the seed, so much the worse for them. It is a childish attitude to adopt, an equivalent of the schoolboy's jeer, "Sucks!" a desire to score off authority, a total lack of understanding that helpfulness and co-operation must be pooled to the common good.

Yet there are many experiments full of interest which can and must be made. There is, for example, the question of substitute foodstuffs for animals at a time when expense and actual shortage must both be taken into consideration. Those happy days are gone when all we had to do was to order the required amounts from the corn merchant and in due course pay the bill. Schemes for a scientific balancing of an alternative diet have been drawn up and encouragement given for a more extensive production of such things as beans, peas and potatoes, but the farmer who all his life has regarded cake and dairy meal as the orthodox nourishment for his cattle resents the innovation and snorts contemptuously at the new-fangled mention of calories and vitamins. True, there are some who will claim proudly that by the end of the year they hope to be self-supporting, but they are the honourable exceptions to the rule.

One unforeseen effect of these extended sowings should prettily influence our landscape next summer. Flax must be grown for the supply of linseed, and if our farmers will cultivate it on any large scale we may look down on sky-blue lakes spreading amongst the fields of corn. It will be an unfamiliar sight, for although flax is grown in the north of Ireland for the worth of its fibre, England has foolishly neglected this most valuable and beautiful crop, relying chiefly on imports from India, Russia, the United States (where it goes by the name of Duluth) and, above all, from Argentina. There is no reason why it should not be successfully cultivated here, with the advantage that the purity of the home-grown crop can be readily controlled. The list of undesirable aliens that can mix themselves with linseed is so long that a special act of Parliament had to be framed to deal with it. Wild mustard, rape and gold-of-pleasure are only three out of the number which nature adds, but dishonest Man also took a hand in the process of adulteration, with his addition of shudes and buffum.

WOOL

This paragraph has nothing to do with agriculture; it has to do only with a little divertissement of my own. I refer to the wool which annually I send to be spun and dyed in Scotland and which later returns in fat ounces, repeating all the colours of autumn. Russet and yellow and red and brown, I took it all to the neighbouring Convent of the Good Shepherd. We tumbled it out onto the table of the parlour. It made a muddle of colour there on the nut-brown polished table of the whitewashed room. We were so much taken up in discussion about plies and skeins that for a time I forgot to look around me; when I did so I suddenly saw the whole room as a revelation. There was a crucifix hanging on the wall, some red leaves in a glass, two nuns in white, seated, a penitent in black, standing. One of the nuns was aged, with a pink-and-white humorous old face; the other, young, with a face calmly beautiful; her hands, emerging from her big white sleeves, made few gestures, but those gestures were as tranquil as though they had been studied. The little penitent stood demurely by. She was robed mediaevally in black, with a white bonnet like a halo round her head; her hands, lest they should offend, were clasped against her belt; her robe was ankle-length; her stockings, white above her buckled shoes. Through the window the quiet landscape showed: some grazing sheep, the church upon the hill and a novice in white, fishing the pond, for Friday's dinner. The wools lay on the table, and in that plain room among the grave women I wondered whether my wools looked more biblical or mundane? They certainly seemed to have some intimate connection with the nuns, the young Magdalen and the landscape shown between the lattices, but what that connection was, I could not exactly determine.

DECEMBER 1939

December is a dull time in the garden. Few things are in flower. It is an interesting time for the practical gardener, who knows that this is the very moment of the year when he can shift and split his plants, but for the amateur who wants to see something in bloom always, it must be admitted to be dull. The amateur, therefore, relies on bulbs for early forcing: narcissus paper-white, Roman hyacinths, other hyacinths and tulips. He orders his supply as soon as the catalogues begin to arrive in August, having been told that the nurserymen execute their orders in rotation. He puts his bulbs into soil or fibre, and by this time he has probably taken most of them out of their dark cupboard, hoping that they are now "nicely rooted" and can afford to have their poor bleached noses exposed to the light. By Christmas, he thinks, he ought to have some bowls flowering on his table.

For years I also have followed this procedure without ever having the curiosity to wonder what exactly was meant by "bulbs for early forcing." I supposed vaguely that the expression referred to bulbs which, grown under suitable conditions, might be persuaded to flower earlier than if they were planted in the ordinary way out of doors. I have just discovered my mistake. It appears that the bulb for early forcing has undergone a special process; the hyacinth, for instance, requires to be lifted when the leaves are still green; the leaves are then cut off and the bulb stored for a time in

a temperature of 85° F. The narcissus, on the other hand, requires to be kept at the relatively low temperature of 48° F. Tulips make demands of their own. Nobody knows the exact reason for these variations, which are supposed to be connected with the mysteries of the flower-forming hormones.

These and other curious facts I learnt from a book called *Science Lends a Hand in the Garden*. Its author, Sir Frederick Keeble, who once earned my gratitude by giving me a prescription for making yew hedges grow with unbelievable rapidity and strength, is a professor of botany who delights in the odd byways of botanical science. It is pleasant to discover from his pages that science now endorses such old superstitions as the one about plant growth and moonshine. Country lore, as usual, turns out to be right. One must, however, be very careful. A mere two days in the wrong direction may make all the difference. Maize must be sown two days before the moon is full; cabbages resent the new moon; radishes and carrots demand no moon at all. Sow them when she is round, and they will emulate her. "Too big," says Sir Frederick sadly; "much too big."

TEASING BEES

The bee, as most people know, is a foolish insect devoid of the power of reasoning. It is capable of doing a few specialized things supremely well, but once you interfere with its routine arrangements it is lost. Thus, although it can fly for long distances in search of nectar, returning safely to its hive, it is incapable of finding that hive if you meanwhile have moved it a paltry twenty yards from the spot where the bee expected to find it. I have never tested the truth of this assertion for myself, but an old bee-keeper of my acquaintance assured me that it was indeed a fact. Sir Frederick Keeble (I don't blame him) is not proof against the temptation of teasing bees.

He does not undertake these experiments merely to prove that the insect is a robot, but to endorse the more pleasing theory that it is, by nature, a dancer. A bee, he says, will not alight upon a flower unless that flower is in motion, a statement which we might all corroborate for ourselves by observation next summer. The lightest breeze will suffice. Now Sir Frederick places pots of natural or artificial flowers on a turntable (bees, he notes, seem to prefer the artificial), and as soon as the table and pots are set in twirling motion the bees will settle on the flowers. This taste for movement is reflected also in the bee's own behaviour. A certain Professor von Frisch has observed the method by which scout bees inform the rest of the hive where nectar is to be obtained. The scout returns from his foray with loaded honey bag and, redolent of his new discovery, performs a dance inside the hive until the scent which he diffuses so intoxicates his fellow workers that they take flight themselves in search of the new treasure. So says Professor von Frisch.

If one were granted a number of lives instead of only one it would be agreeable to devote one of them to some study such as the habits of bees. Professor von Frisch has made prolonged experiments to discover whether bees are colour blind or not and has come to the conclusion that they are not. They can distinguish between nearly all the colours of the spectrum; red alone eludes them, and they see it as black. Nor are they very definite about violet and purple, and yellow bothers them in its relation to orange and green. How soothing it would be to spend one life in a world focused on such gentle and unnecessary observation![*]

Far from this, a catalogue I have just received includes the following item:

Collections for covering mounds of air-raid shelters: berberis, cotoneaster, cydonia, etc.

[*] Since this note was written a book has been published which may well be read in conjunction with Sir Frederick's.

SORROW AND COMPENSATION

Christmas 1939

The usual solace of the country lover and gardener during the dead winter months is this year denied him: the anticipation of the spring. In normal years he may feel that if he endures the east wind, the dark days, the quiescence of nature, with reasonable patience and hope, his reward will come to him: the first warm day will seem warmer, the first blossoms brighter, by reason of the long privation philosophically borne. This year the very thought of spring screws a spiral of irony into the heart. The spirit rises only to fall with an immediate thud, a lark shot down.

A very minor and tiny effect of war.

Nevertheless, there are always compensations, though one may feel almost ashamed of looking round for them. In my own case the ill wind has blown me one bit of good for which I feel apologetic, since I have benefited by my neighbour's misfortune.

One hates doing that, but if I record it here perhaps my conscience may be relieved.

Ever since I first discovered the delights of the Alpine House at Kew in winter I had cherished the ambition to possess even a small replica of that bejewelled and brilliant display. My ambition was modest. I realized that Kew had backyards full of frames and innumerable gardeners to keep the Alpine House always supplied with colour. Pans could be carried in and carried out as their flowering period demanded. There was a supply on which to draw: duds could be scrapped, successes retained, and the effect inside the Alpine House was one of triumph presented to the public. The stagings need never be left without something of interest. Obviously the amateur gardener could never hope to compete with this double wealth of supply and labour. So I sighed in envious, hopeless admiration, contenting myself with a few pans of saxifrage, a few pots of the choicer small bulbs, gradually and economically assembled together. The results pleased me: they were very delicate and bright in their shelter on the ugly days when the outside world looked wan.

Then the war came, and I found that I could oblige a neighbour by housing a quantity of his plants during his absence from his own garden. At least he thought I was obliging him, not realising the extent to which he was delighting me. There they stand, tight and crowded, my wartime evacuees, many of them the precious fruit of expeditions to the Atlas, the Andes, Yukon, the Himalaya.... Many are rare, one unique in England; some bear names out of all proportion to their size; some are so expensive in the market that I visit them in daily terror lest some pest or blight should have attacked them during the night. It is alarming to be entrusted with minute guests worth several pounds sterling a handful; as bad as taking charge of somebody else's dog. Yet despite my anxiety my excitement is boiling; I feel like a millionaire benefactor, a collector, an explorer, all rolled into one.

They are not yet in flower, and to the nongardening eye their monotony of green and grey appears dull. I do not mind in the least when my friends find nothing to admire in my evacuees; I know that in a few weeks' time they will have to take back their scorn. Faith can see beyond. There are buds if you look closely, which already promise the waves of colour shortly to sweep the stagings into a pavement of mosaic. My excitement is heightened by the fact that in my ignorance I don't know what half of these treasures is going to produce. Nor, exactly, does their real owner, as some of them have not yet had time to flower under his care since their first introduction into England. I am to be privileged to observe the first awakening of another man's child.

One solitary pot of bulbs, however, is already and most appositely in flower. It is an iris, rare, exquisite and sparse in its distribution even in its native land. Few nurserymen list it. One of the few catalogues where I could find it mentioned at all dismissed it as "unobtainable." A second catalogue I consulted listed it at 7s. 6d. a bulb. One does not reckon things by their cost in relation to their beauty, but I must admit that the responsibility for £5 worth of a pale small iris, belonging to somebody else, did startle me to the extent of looking up that iris in an authoritative book on the genus. What I learnt there about it drove all thoughts of its monetary value out of my head. It was flowering in my home for Christmas, and its own home was Nazareth.

THE TWENTY-SECOND OF FEBRUARY, 1940

The hard weather has gone for the moment, and the first deceptive day of spring arrived with so warm a rush as to make us believe it would be succeeded by many others. Of course with our reason we know that this is unlikely. We know that a bit of February is still to come and the whole of March, frequently one of the most unpleasant months in the calendar. Yet it is difficult to be prudent and sceptical when the first sunlight one has seen for many weeks wakes one between the curtains and makes one leap from bed to find a very different kind of day awaiting one outside. Warm air is surprising after the shivering cold one has learnt to expect. It is surprising to find that one wants to throw off one's coat instead of dragging it closely round one. How delightful to be free of the heavy coat! How delightful to walk unhampered, even if only for one day! How delightful to enjoy in a platitudinous way the simple pleasures of the first suggestion of spring: the birds singing once more, the earth soft to the tread after the stiffness of frost, the evidence of things beginning again to love and bud and grow.

We Britons are perhaps specially sensitive to such movements of the seasons, since our seasons melt and merge into one another more elastically than the more violently demarcated seasons of stronger climates. Our seasons interchange their character in a way unknown to the extremes of north or south. Thus the citizen of Leningrad knows that the spring will not arrive till the middle of May and arranges his existence and his mind to suit that necessity; he does not expect the spring and so is not disappointed when he does not get it somewhere in the middle of February; the inhabitant of Shiraz, on the other hand, would be extremely indignant if his spring suddenly reverted to winter. We have learnt to be more tolerant. We are grateful for the one warm day coming in the midst of our tribulations and with our usual happy-go-lucky optimism assume at once that the warm happy days have arrived to last.

DESTRUCTION OF THE WINTER

Gardeners are already beginning to look round for the deaths that the frost and winds have brought to their treasures. It is difficult to decide as yet what murder has taken place. Nothing but the true spring will show, the true spring that brings the fresh shoot up from the root, when all the top growth seemed deathly seared and browned. As all observant gardeners know, it is worth their while to keep a seemingly dead plant in the ground until May has gone far into her date. Surprising revivals occur with the real warmth of sun and soil. Personally I shall be reluctant to throw any plant or shrub onto the rubbish heap until May has convinced me that it is as dead as a black twig, dead, finally dead.

I go round the garden on these first warm days, hoping to see signs of survival among the more tender plants. I scrape the stem with my thumbnail, hoping that it will show me a streak of pale green, as I presume many loving gardeners are doing all over the country. I am surprised and pleased to find that the pomegranate is still alive and the myrtles, too, though their leaves are green no longer but brown. An unjustifiable vanity comes over me that these valued things should have passed safely through the hard time they have had to endure—as though it were any merit of mine.

COLOUR IN THE SNOW

The snow has gone then, and the spring pretends to arrive. How contrary one's moods are! I now almost regret the rigours of this winter, which provided scenes and moments of such fantastic beauty. There was the moment when the aviary, full of brightly coloured parakeets, turned into a cave of snow, the purest snow driven against the wire netting, making a roof and walls of simple whiteness. Against this whiteness the blue, yellow and green of the birds showed up with such brilliance that they might have been floodlit. No painter but Van Gogh could have splashed them onto canvas.

Then, still amazed by the colours the birds had shown me within their snowbound cage, I came across a man working a blowlamp against a frozen pipe. The colours of the flame reproduced the colours of the birds, orange and green, yellow and blue. It spat a tongue of viciously combined colours in the frosty air as the long icicles, reflecting its iridescence, slowly began to drip.

SNOW

There is a line of poetry so familiar to me that I well might inadvertently think it mine and be blamed for passing off as my own something not of my making, a line mixed so closely with the working of my mind that it comes back to me every winter whenever the transforming snowfall alters the ordinary aspect of fields and woods. I am not sure where it comes from, but I fancy it is by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose poetical works I do not happen to possess, and it runs:

The frolic architecture of the snow.

I am not sure either whether it is good poetry or not—a little precious, perhaps, a little whimsical—but it does convey something to me of the quality fresh snow gives to the landscape, something of the black-and-whiteness, the emphasized design of boundaries, the darkness of water, the toss of trees. Frolic. Yes, it has an altering touch; nothing else is like it. Of course to be beautiful snow must be thick and fresh; the patchy days of thaw are Nature at her ugliest, when it is better to avert the eyes until everything is green and brown again.

The recent snow was preceded by three days of something even more beautiful, something which the foot of man does not smirch or the ruts of his wagon wheels impair. The hoarfrost is inviolable. Each twig and blade sparkled separately as the big red sun came slowly overlaying the whiteness with a tinge of pink. The world was so crisp you could almost hear it crackle. On every pane of the windows the frost had drawn patterns as exquisite as the veining of transparent leaves, no two alike, in a very low relief which one traced with the tip of a finger, sending correspondent filaments of cold up the veining of one's arm. A thing to be noted during the days of hoarfrost was the peculiar brilliant green of moss in woodland paths. It came through the whiteness with an almost vicious viridescence.

"WEAR WILLOW IN THY HAT"

Why was the willow ever adopted as a symbol of grief? I cannot tell because I do not know. I can suggest only that the variety whose habit has caused it to be named the weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*) may be responsible for this dismal attribution, mentioned specifically in Psalm 137, verse 2:

By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down...
We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

Now no one, without the help of string or a miracle, could possibly dangle a harp on the very flexible pendulous twigs of *Salix babylonica*. The harp would instantly slide off. The logical conclusion is that the tree upon which the author of the Psalms hung his harp must have been a very different tree from the one we now know as the Babylonian willow.

These quasi-historical remarks do not destroy the pleasure one takes in the willows one grows ignorantly and confidently in one's own garden. Confidently, because they grow with such ease, grace and rapidity. Still grief, baskets, polo balls, cricket bats and the frames which support the bearskins of the Brigade of Guards do seem an odd combination.

Willows were very much in my mind just before I started to write these notes. I knew the time had come when I ought to prune them. One cuts and cuts, slicing the stems slantwise just below the bud, and then to compensate oneself for the apparent damage done to the sunrise-coloured plantation, carries off a bundle of prunings to any stray moist piece of ground and sticks them in to a depth of twelve or eighteen inches, confident that fifty to seventy-five per cent will take root and provide sturdy little willows for planting out next year.

Coincidences do occur in life, and so it happened that when darkness descended on me just as I had finished sticking in my willow prunings and could scarcely see what I was doing any longer, I came indoors and opened a book on the very chapter which concerned the job I had been at (*The Skeptical Gardener*, by Humphrey John). Here was a man, I found, who had experimented with willows and knew more than I could ever hope to know. A fine, fastidious gardener he appeared to be, noticing nice shades of difference between *Salix vitellina* and *Salix alba*, esteeming *Salix daphnoides* which has the bloom of a grape all up the stem, observant enough to note that the more brilliant colour of red- or yellow-barked willows occurs on the south side of the young growth. His whole book pleased me vastly, the chapter on willows most of all. It made me wish that someone would write a monograph on willows, a most attractive subject which I offer gratis to any curious and leisurely researcher, perhaps Mr Humphrey John himself. But if anyone feels inclined to undertake this task I do implore him to travel first to Media and make his way to a stream which runs beneath the ruins of Rhages where Tobias went with his Archangel and his Dog, and there to sniff the scented willow which grows along that stream. I took cuttings of it myself on several occasions, but they either failed to strike or withered before I could get them home. I believe that there is a so-called scented willow to be obtained from nurserymen; in fact, I have a vague recollection of being shown it in someone's garden, but surely it cannot spread such warm sweetness as in that tawny valley under the Median sun.

THE WEEPING WILLOW

It is not generally realized that we owe all our weeping willows to the most unexpected person—Alexander Pope. One does not think of Pope primarily as a gardener, but evidently he must have possessed a shrewd horticultural sense, for he pulled a withy out of the basket containing a present of figs sent from Smyrna to Lady Suffolk and, remarking: "Perhaps this will produce something we have not in England," carried it off with him to Twickenham, stuck it into the ground and thus gave root to the solitary parent of all future weeping willows in England.

I owe to Sir Stephen Tallents the reminder of this complete little poem by the son of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett:

*The willow is a green fountain.
None hath called it a green fountain,
But only Pennini.*

LENCTEN-TID

The Saxons gave the month of March this name not so much in deference to the great Christian fast which we call Lent as to the lengthening of the days. They also called it the rough month (Hreth monath), or the boisterous month (Hlyd monath), but for us it remains, more unpleasantly, the month which the Romans dedicated to the god of war.

This year (1940) Easter fell early; it fell so nearly on Our Lady's Day, which is March 25 in the Catholic calendar, as to recall the old couplet with sinister intent:

When my Lord falls in my Lady's lap,

England beware of some mishap,

which in turn reminds me of the unfortunately named Lady Day, to whom a wag addressed a letter:

*The 25th of March,
Foley Place,
London.*

The post office unravelled the puzzle and the letter was duly delivered.

BELATED SPRING

Even allowing for the fact that my garden is always a late garden, being exposed to the winds on the top of a little hill, the spring does come unconscionably slowly up this way this year (1940). Perhaps 1939 was misleading. A mild January and February brought everything forward in an alarming fashion. I am not good at keeping an ordinary diary, but I do take notes fairly and conscientiously in a special gardening diary, so looking back over my recorded dates of 1939, I discover discrepancies between that spring and this. I find, for example, that last year the Algerian iris had been in full flower since the first week in February, whereas this year it evidently has no intention of flowering at all; iris reticulata was in bloom in the open by February 19, and this year it is exactly a month later; the common almond was a pink cloud by March 12, the forsythia a fountain of gold, the crown imperials beginning to show colour. This year the almonds are still black, the forsythia barely yellow, the crown imperials only a few green inches out of the ground; the only consolation in one's impatience is that a few days of sunshine, if we ever get them, will bring out a rush of flowers in unusual companionship.

Talking of unusual companionship, here is a plant association of dark and regal splendour offered as a suggestion to gardening readers who enjoy making experiments. (A different type of season might, of course, upset the coincidence of blooming, but this year it would have worked to perfection.) Under three or four bushes of the rose-red daphne mezereum grow a large patch of the deepest purple crocus with iris reticulata coming up amongst them and surround the whole patch with a wide belt of *primula wanda*. Plant if possible where the low rays of the setting sun will strike across them in the evening. A background of red willow, *Salix britzensis*, neatly pollarded and throwing up its wands incarnadine, will increase the richness of the glow. Extend this suggestion at your will. For instance, you might surround the belt of *primula wanda* with a further belt of violets and then again with a third belt of the little pink violet called Coeur d'Alsace. The scheme could grow indefinitely like ripples spreading in a pond.

WHITE CURRANT

March

Last week I went to a country wedding and was surprised to find the church filled with sheaves of white flowering currant. It had been picked on so lavish a scale that the effect was of great bushes growing in every window and along the altar rails, a snowy loveliness which the conventional white wedding lilies could never have equalled. Naturally I took it for the white form of the common American ribes, and yet surely that white form lacked the purity of this. It was creamier; it even had a pinkish tinge, robbing it of this dead-white ghostly quality. Subsequent inquiries brought me an unexpected piece of information. It appears that if you cut branches of the common red variety while still in bud and bring it indoors, it will flower white. This may be a well-known fact, but it struck me as very curious and left me wondering whether it would apply to any other form of flowering shrub. It would be an experiment worth trying.

DIG FOR BEAUTY

The gardening papers have all been urging us not to neglect our flowers in favour of our vegetables. Their contention is that man cannot live by potatoes and onions alone but that his spiritually aesthetic need is as great as his physical. There is much to be said for this argument, though the more practical man might reply that sufficient beauty may be found supplied by nature without cost or labour in a copse crammed with bluebells, windflowers, foxgloves, with a dash of wild crab and honeysuckle thrown in amongst the shadows of the wood. True. We need but walk out into our woods to find compositions of loveliness which no gardener can rival. Not even the most millionaire amongst gardeners. Nature has her own ideas and carries them out in a wildly careless way. We try to copy and to reproduce, but how inadequate our copy is, how meagre (though expensive) our reproduction!

Why not, therefore, abandon all attempt to keep up our gardens in this austere time? Grow cabbages instead of cabbage roses? Peas instead of sweet peas?

The gardening editors are wise enough not to confine themselves to the sentimental argument alone but to put in a plea for consideration of the nursery-men. It is indeed bitter to reflect that the patient creation of a fine nursery stock, demanding many years, much thought and considerable enterprise, should be scrapped on the bonfire either to make room for vegetables or because the diminished orders do not allow the retention of the necessary labour. (I know many of the men have been called up or voluntarily gone, but there are women, and women can make most excellent gardeners.) I heard with grief of such a case the other day. Loads of fine shrubs had been ruthlessly dug up and stacked on a smother fire. Now many of those shrubs and trees represented not only years of careful cultivation but also the endurance and knowledge of wandering botanists in distant and difficult countries. It is surely not for this that men have travelled over the Andes and the Atlas, through Burma and over Tibet. Whether the devastation takes place in a private or a commercial garden, the loss remains the same. Many of these shrubs and trees have found their way to Europe only since the beginning of this century, and their fully grown beauty can only just be beginning to be realized. It is wasteful to destroy them or their progeny, and the day will come when many of us will regret the depletion and bewail it too late.

WINTER LOSSES

Nature meanwhile has lent a hand to the slaughter with good will during the past few months. Nature seemed to have gone Nazi, and April is already showing us a good many places where we must begin to lose hope. This winter can be regarded as a final test of horticultural hardiness or the reverse, for some surprising deaths have been equalled by some surprising survivals. The loss of that strong-growing yellow rose mermaid was perhaps not to be wondered at, for she had always been reputed tender (I must say it comes as a shock to find how badly the China roses also have suffered), but it is an agreeable surprise to find *R. sinica anemone* unharmed. The specie roses and their hybrids also seem to have stood up to their troubles very well. I am not happy about the various kinds of ceanothus, but the clear blue cerato-stigma Willmottiana, which I had fully expected to lose, seems to have plenty of life left in it, though it may well have been cut to the ground. *Romneya coulteri* lives, but a great deal of rosemary doesn't, a sad blow, for they were large bushes. *Grevillea rosmarini folia* has gone, but *Eccremocarpus scaber*, which I could have spared, is flourishing. I do not believe that *Drymys winterii* will ever show a bud again, but is it much of a loss? An overrated plant, I think, though the red stems were handsome. The leptospermums are doubtful, but I think they have gone and regret the coral-pink variety *Nichollsii*.

The moral of this winter, if one has the leisure to live up to it, is always to keep a supply of rooted cuttings in pots which may be covered over by bracken or sheltered in a frame. The wise gardener in this fashion creates his own little nursery and fills his gaps without any damage to his pocket.

APOLOGIA

It is not easy to write these notes amidst the anguish and anxiety of Europe. The smother fire of the garden becomes only too readily symbolical, and the destruction of harmless, civilized, cultivated plants equally symbolical. My only excuse can be that the determination to preserve such beauty as remains to us is also a form of courage.

SURPRISES

Among the minor pleasures of life, doubly precious just now, is the habit that some plants have of appearing in unexpected places. Thus the starry blue anemone of the Apennines crops up in patches among the grass of the English orchard when it was really intended to remain sharing a border with the bulbs of early spring. There is something particularly satisfying in the union of blue and green, colours that compliment (I purposely do not write complement) one another, each courteously drawing out a quality from the other, the green making the blue seem brighter, the blue emphasizing the extreme greenness of the young grass. A pity that Marvell never had the opportunity of observing this; it would surely have pleased him, but probably they never grew *Anemone apennina* or *Scilla sibirica* at Appleton House. Not that the Apennine anemone is very bright in its blueness; it holds more of the powder blue loved by the Chinese and by Nattier, but *Scilla sibirica* in its blueness rivals the vernal gentian. Grown in grass, it excels in intensity of colour its companions grown in the plain brown soil. Blue and brown do not compliment one another. Blue and grey, on the other hand, do, and I observe that a well-established pool of scillas will, in the course of years, travel gradually across a stone-paved path between the cracks of the paving in a little tide of advancing blue runnels, where no gardener, however imaginative and optimistic, would think of planting them. Nature has ideas of her own which put ours to shame. The little lavender crocus, *Tomasianus*, is another wanderer, and some of the finest lilies of the valley I have ever seen (reputed to exact a rich soil and cool conditions) had spread themselves all over a cindered path in the full glare of the summer sun. To continue, the common rosemary will seed itself of its own accord in situations it would never have accepted for a moment at our desire. I have two strong young rosemaries growing out of a solid brick wall, in the chinks of the mortar; and, by the way, it is worth noting that these two are the healthiest survivors of their family after this wicked winter. Clearly the reason is that neither frost nor damp could penetrate the wall to their roots, so the protection of the masonry replaced the protection of stone and boulder on their native Mediterranean hills. This shows the good sense of the seedlings in choosing that dry, inhospitable spot. There are many legends connected with rosemary, but the one which consoles me best for the losses of this winter is the one which tells me that rosemary can never grow taller than Christ in His term here below: after thirty-three years, it is said, it ceases to gain height and begins to spread sideways. I forget where I learnt this fact, but I try to derive a philosophical comfort from it as I contemplate the dead brown bushes which have failed me long before their three and thirty years were achieved.

The wild flowers share this pleasing trick of gate crashing with the imported foreigners. Just now the woods are blowing with our native windflower, the white anemone, which is sometimes pink and which blows itself freely into corners of the garden. I should never have thought of planting it deliberately, particularly not in the corners it has chosen for itself. It has a taste for its location which I must recognize as being better than mine. I should never have thought of placing it at the foot of pleached limes, but it is perfectly in accordance there where it has set itself, flowering before the limes have come into leaf. There is a pure stark nakedness about the white flower which perfectly matches the nakedness of the lime branches overhead. The early flower and the belated leaf—there is a sort of mystical communion between them which I accept but find hard to explain. This sense of communion and suitability happens so often in nature that the lover of nature must recognize it as a fact without trying to explain it away. It just exists; it *is*. Like faith, it is not to be argued; either it is to be accepted or rejected, and he who rejects it is the poorer for the rejection.

WAR ANECDOTE

These considerations lead me back from the haphazard arrangements of nature to one of the most charming tiny stories which comes out of the war. A hospital in a south-coast town ran out of its sand supply for its sandbags; it therefore authorized its willing helpers to obtain sand or soil wherever available, even from the public garden if need be. Sacks were filled and stacked up and no questions asked. They stood there, sturdily and soddenly protecting the walls and windows throughout the winter. But with the spring came a change. Green shoots began to appear through cracks of the sacking, and now the whole grim barricade blows with yellow daffodils.

MY COUNTRYMEN

There are moments when I dislike, other moments when I like, my countrymen. The moments when I like them are the moments when I most vividly realize how puzzling we must be to the people of other nations. They must smile (one hopes indulgently) at what they regard as our infantilism and sentimentality. For a people reputed practical, a perfidious race, a nation of shopkeepers and all that, we must sometimes appear very odd indeed. Very odd, inexplicable and rather silly. For myself, I do not find us silly in these moods but endearing.

I recently met with two perfect examples of this trait in the British race. I set them here on record without further comment. The first incident is about some rabbits which have chosen to make their home under the floor of the living room in my house. They have made their way in by a ventilating hole left in the bricks. They go in and out, and although I don't mind very much what they do while they are in, I mind very much indeed what they do while they are out. They scratch. They eat. They eat lettuces and clove carnations. Their nuisance value is one hundred per cent. They must be abolished, destroyed. The only question is how to set about it.

We try ferrets.

Ferrets fail because the rabbits play a game of catch-as-catch-can between the floor joists, and so far as the ferret is concerned, it turns into a game of catch-as-catch-can't. The rabbit has won. The ferret gets chirruped out of the hole and restored to his sack, a failure at his job. Floor joists are evidently different from a burrow. I confess I do not fully understand how this can be, since I always imagined that joists fitted nicely at either end, so do not see how the rabbit can possibly play hide-and-seek between them, but he must manage to do so in some way as so far we have not succeeded in turning him out.

Ferrets are off the map. Rabbits remain. Lettuces and carnations do not.

I suggest putting a bit of wire mesh over the hole. The gardener looks at me dubiously. Do I mean the mesh to keep the rabbits out, in which case they will continue to scratch and eat, or to keep them in? I reply rather weakly that I meant it to keep them in. I have not thought out the implications very clearly for myself, but the gardener sees them instantly. "I don't mind killing a thing outright," he says, "but I wouldn't like the idea of leaving it shut in to starve."

Clean. One shoots and kills. One does not imprison a living creature to a slow and anxious death.

TIMBER

My second incident is about trees. Living in the country as I do, it periodically becomes necessary to sell a few trees in order to supply the hearths with firewood for the following winter. In order to do this I make an appointment with the local timber merchant and walk through the wood with him, marking the trees he desires to throw. He will take the trunk for planks, leaving me the lop and top for cordwood, which I may then collect and burn. It is a square deal: he gets his planks and I get my firing. I dislike knowing that a tree has got to come down, and I dislike hearing the murderous rasp of the knife which marks and condemns it, but apart from this it is pleasant in the wood, and I enjoy the scraps of wood lore which the timber master lets fall. He does not find me an altogether satisfactory vendor but sighs ruefully when I refuse to let the finest oaks go. After some years of association, however, he now knows that it is no use even asking for them. This year in particular, when he can sell all the timber he can buy, my obstinacy must have been galling to him. Yet setting his business apart, his sympathies are really on my side. Thus he desires more than anything to obtain Scotch fir and tentatively inquired whether I would be prepared to sell. There is only a small group in the wood, but they are fine tall trees, and after the manner of Scotch firs they have set themselves to their best advantage on the crest of a hill. When I declined, he looked really pleased. He had done his duty and was relieved at not having to carry it out. "I thought as much," he said, "and I don't mind telling you that in your place I would say the same."

It may not be the best way to do business, perhaps, but I like him for realizing that there are some things beyond business.

SPRING 1940

All writers on country matters have commented on the particular beauty of this spring, and doubtless many keepers of private diaries have made similar entries. Some of us have taken the view that Nature was mocking us; others, that she was doing her best to console. One must make up one's mind which way to accept it. At moments the recurrent exaggerated beauty seemed unendurable; at other moments it came as a gift of permanence and reassurance. I suppose it all greatly depends on the moods which attack us at different hours of the day, moods beyond the control of reason, moods not based on "the news" but on some strange, unanalyzed psychological process taking place within ourselves. Between breakfast and midday one may sink to a failure of spirit; during the afternoon rise to courage and confidence; by the evening be almost able to persuade oneself that one really prefers to watch history in this smoky foundry of its making than to live in the Victorian security of the late nineteenth century. The difficulty is to establish any constant level of one's mettle.

People vary, but probably for most of us the early hours are the worst. To wake at dawn when the physical strength is lowest, when the mind between sleeping and waking is at its least manageable, when the nightmare slowly turns out to be not a nightmare at all but the far more terrible truth, when the loneliness of soul overcomes us and the sorrow of the separate burden appears in its starkness as a thing never to be shared—then indeed is the moment when courage is needed to find consolation and not irony in the beauty of nature. Yet consolation is to be had and a strange exhilaration, even in that bleak, abandoned hour. Perhaps the loneliness in itself serves to enhance perception's poignancy. I know that the other morning when I awoke, aroused not only by the first square of dawn beyond my window but also by the thrum of engines overhead, I looked out on a world so fair that the grief attendant on that hour dissolved into what was almost a rejoicing in the union of tragedy and beauty. It suggested a mythological marriage between light and darkness: the pale nymph of the English dawn lying still virginal and unravished before the Wagnerian wooing of Wotan. A thin and milky mist drifted across the trees; a huge pale lemon moon still moved suspended in the morning sky. A few stars still showed, pale yellow in the pale blue, though the weaker ones had vanished with the night. Those few great stars which had travelled from darkness into daylight seemed to me symbols of the faint, far hope persisting into dawn. The weak had been extinguished; the strong remained. And in a few moments the sun would come up, flooding all.

At times like these, when symbolism comes to mean something beyond a mere intellectual expression, great phrases surge into the mind. In times of stress and anxiety the great phrases of literature and thought reappear with a fresh meaning. Thus on that morning as I looked out of the window a phrase of Jeremy Taylor swelled like an organ: "If our death could be put off a little longer, what advantage can it be in the accounts of nature or felicity? They that three

thousand years ago died unwillingly and stopped death two days or stayed it a week, what is their gain? *Where is that week?*" (His italics, not mine.)

And then again, still looking out of the window, I got an echo of a passage from Plato's *Crito*, which I verified after breakfast and found apposite with a few omissions: "Is your wisdom such that you do not see that your country is precious and to be revered and in high esteem and that you ought to show her reverence and obedience and ought to do whatever she commands and to suffer if she commands you to suffer, in silence, and if she orders you to be scourged or imprisoned or if she leads you to war to be wounded or slain, her will is to be done? You must not draw back or leave your post, but in war and everywhere you must do whatever the State, your country, commands."

FORESIGHT

I have read that in some part of the United States an underground cache has been prepared, a cache of buried history, which may reveal to the historian of 10,000 A.D. not only the major events which led ultimately to the disappearance of Western civilization, assuming all our printed matter, books, newspapers, periodicals, photographs, cinema films and other records to have perished by then, either by the hand of man or time, but also the details of daily life which, however insignificant, formed part of our make-up. Easier to read than the fossils, requiring (one hopes) no Rosetta stone; more explicit than the charred striated hearths or scratched depiction of the Cro-Magnon caves, this pitifully provident cache should earn the gratitude of our descendants. One has only to consider how grateful we ourselves should be for a similar prescience on the part of any Pharaoh or of Bur-Sin, king of Ur.

It is to be hoped that some small effects of war on rural districts will not be omitted from this comprehensive record. One calls them small effects, not because they are unimportant in themselves, but because they are unexpected, unusual and minor in comparison with the major doings on a grander and more tragic scale. Thus I can imagine that it might startle and amuse our descendants to learn that at a given moment England removed all signposts from her roads, obliterated all names of villages from her post offices and tradesmen's vans and, in short, did everything possible to confuse not only an air-borne enemy but also the most innocent motorist trying to find his way about his own native island. This is the sort of thing which easily gets forgotten when the serious historian starts to pull out his Gibbonian organ stops. One wag suggested, I believe, that instead of removing our signposts we should reverse them, but although the idea was considered by the authorities it was finally rejected, and an impression of actual silence now reigns at the crossroads. There are no longer any friendly little remarks to inform us whether we are making for Rye or Hastings.

It is curious also to come suddenly on a group of old wagons waiting by the side of our peaceful lanes. It is for barricades that they are wanted, not for hay. They remind one of films of the French Revolution. Curious also are the occupations in which people now indulge: I had never thought to spend an afternoon filling old wine bottles with petrol, paraffin and tar and finishing them off with two of Messrs Brock's gay blue Guy Fawkes squibs bound tightly to the sides. These absurd but lethal missiles are known facetiously as Molotov cocktails. This novel form of bottle party is conducted with the usual supply of English chaff and good humour: it is quite difficult to detect the underlying grimness. Every now and then a flight of aeroplanes passes over, glittering in the summer sky. An onlooker, aged two, points upwards. "Bombers," she says cheerfully. "Germits." Thus does the youngest generation accept as a matter of course the facts of war. Germits....

And every evening at dusk the tramp of feet goes up my tower, passing the door as I sit working. Very slow and heavy they go, like the tramp of men-at-arms. Seventy-five steps they climb, dwindling into silence, and when I go out later I see two figures outlined against the moon behind the parapet. My solitary old tower! It must have watched many things, and whenever it rocks in a gale I reflect for my comfort that it must have rocked in many gales without coming down during the past four hundred years. It watched three thousand French prisoners quartered here in 1760 under the guard of Edward Gibbon; it watched German prisoners quartered here in 1916. Now in 1940 it acts as a lookout post for the Home Guard, with their rifles slung across their backs. The baker's boy and the blacksmith's son are carrying on the tradition.

It watches also the seasonal processes which must be familiar to it since it is forty years older than Thomas Tusser and the publication of his *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*; the calm processes which have never yet been interrupted. We are still making hay and shearing sheep. My tower was already standing when Queen Elizabeth said in a temper, "I will not have my sheep marked with a strange brand, nor suffer them to follow the pipe of a strange shepherd." She would have said the same today.

She who had a gift of phrase and mettle far removed from meiosis, would, I think, have approved of the baker's boy and the blacksmith's son watching the English meadows from the top of a tower already half a century old when the Invincible Armada sailed against England. She would have felt a virago pride in seeing the tower standing, English, perennial, rustic and alone.

HOT

The weather reports said that it was going to be hot again. I like the euphemism of that "again." It tempts us poor northern islanders to believe that at some moment of our summer we have been hot. Personally I am grateful if I can feel merely warm without conscious effort. The ideal temperature, to my mind, is the temperature when one is neither hot nor cold, but unconcerned with the ambient air. People's ideas differ as to the exact mark on the thermometer when this stage is supposed to be reached, and I wonder what they would say to a charming little eighteenth-century thermometer which instead of recording dull numbers climbs from *chambre de malade* to *serre* and from *serre* to *vers à soie*. Usually one finds that the complaints begin when we reach 70° F. in the shade. On one subject, however, there is no scope for a divergence of opinion, for after fifteen rainless days an official drought is proclaimed; the countryside bursts into flames, and prayers for rain are offered in the churches, sometimes with disastrous effect. Even on this question the general impression left on the minds of the natives seems to differ, for, looking back on their summer, few of them agree on any point save one: the exceptional badness of the season. Their only disagreement is as to where the most regrettable patch of weather occurred. Thus when I had occasion the other day to inspect a number of cottage gardens for the purpose of judging a competition, in each one of them I met with the inevitable excuses and exonerations: the flowers had all failed this year owing to the (*a*) drought, (*b*) rain. There was nothing to do but to smile sympathetically and agree.

JULY 1940

The summer still maintains its exceptional beauty: day after day of sunshine, evening after evening that lacks only the fireflies to suggest our lost Italy. There is a softness about the air, a scent of musk and hay, a scent borne from the great white lilies to the tumbling roses. It has seemed for weeks as though the weather must break, as though some sudden storm must come to shatter the trance; the monotony of beauty has married itself to the suspense in which we live. Only a few sharp showers have interrupted our anxiety about the drought. A countryman expressed himself as one coining a new proverb when he said, "Hitler and the rain will come together."

The rain has not yet come, except in dribblets and those few short storms. Meanwhile, although the corn and the hops are still thirsty, much of the hay has been carried and new stacks have risen to take the place of those that dwindled throughout the winter. I observe with pleasure an evidence of thrift, new in this country though common among the peasantry of other lands: the saving of the rough grass from verges along the roads and lanes. Usually this is mixed with brambles and other matter which render it unfit for anything but bedding; this year the grass is being set aside to join the hay upon the stacks. One hopes that this simple lesson has now been learnt once and for all time. If only it could be extended and even enforced all over the country, thousands of valuable tons of hay could be added annually to our production.

In the gardens the turf is turning brown, and one notices also that the flowers are stunted in their growth, owing to lack of rain. The delphiniums are a third short of the height they ought to be. On the other hand, I notice with self-satisfaction that my counsel to leave apparently dead shrubs in the ground till the end of May has been justified. The mistake I made was in saying the end of May instead of the end of June. If ever we get another winter like the winter of 1939-40 I shall pursue the policy of leaving them even until the following spring. One need never, I find, lose hope. Miraculous resuscitations are still taking place. Within the last week I have discovered many a Lazarus among the dead.

Little green shoots are appearing at the base of many a brown dead trunk, proving that the root is alive even though the top may have perished.

In these days, I find, one readily interprets the happenings of nature into symbolism. It is, I suppose, a psychological effect of war strain. One clings to the permanence and recurrence of nature. It is a calming and reassuring thought. Nature goes on in spite of the mess mankind makes of mankind.

Yet nature is a nasty cruel thing. I had an example of it when I watched a small, horrifying sight: a young frog panting and injured on the garden path. As I came up to him, wondering what harm could have befallen him—a careless foot treading on his soft body, perhaps?—I observed an evil head shooting out of a hole in the wall, an adder, a beautiful snake full of venom, that drew the frog towards him, terrified and fascinated by the superior power. The frog, instead of turning towards me, who would have rescued him from danger, limped towards the wall, tried to clamber up it and remained clinging onto the bricks by his forefeet while the pointed head of the adder shot out at intervals from his retreat. I watched. The frog remained frozen as a bas-relief, his body flattened in terror against the wall. The snake put out his dangerous, his fanged head, alive, spiteful, menacing. He did not dare to send out the length of his lithe body because of my presence there.

BULBS FOR THE AUTUMN[*]

[*]Since this note was written the Board of Trade order has been rescinded, and we may now order bulbs from our home firms.

We are not to be allowed to buy bulbs this year, even if we have the money to do so. A wise order of the Board of Trade will forbid such purchases, at any rate until such time as the demands of the American market have been satisfied. English bulbs will go to the U.S.A. as gracious and lucrative envoys of a country which would rather say it with flowers than with bombs. The English bulb-growing industry should benefit in the long run, though one is sorry to realize that it must be at the expense of the Dutch bulb growers, surely as inoffensive a race of experts as ever graced Europe in the pursuance of their affair.

Meanwhile what are we to do about our deprivation? Few of us would wish to forego the solace of some brightness in our rooms during the dark days of winter. They have long been precious to our hearts, those bowls of fibre or pots of soil which we keep in dark cupboards or plunge in ashes, bringing them out gradually to the light as the blanched noses of hyacinth, narcissus, crocus or tulip push up, demanding more light to turn them green and eventually to bring them into the colours which we receive gratefully as our reward. Are we to be defrauded of this small pleasure in this year of care?

A little ingenuity will, and quite legally, circumvent the order of the Board of Trade.

This is the month when we can lift some bulbs from our own garden or beg some from the garden of a friend and pot them up in the usual way. A spade thrust into an old bed of spring-flowering bulbs should bring up enough for our needs, even if we do slice a few in half in the process. It is true that they will not bloom quite so early as the bulb specially prepared for forcing and will possibly not produce quite such fine blooms, but even if we do have to wait until January instead of filling our rooms by Christmas the experiment is worth a trial.

There are other methods by which we may increase our supply, not for indoor use this time, but for eventual use in

the garden. The first and most obvious method is to dig up some established bulbs and detach the innumerable bulblets which will be found clustered round the parent. These can be planted in any spare piece of ground—straight drills, conspicuously labelled at each end, are convenient since the nursery is then less likely to be disturbed by digging and weeding—and in the course of two or three years will reward our labour by developing into full-size bulbs. Tulips lend themselves richly to reproduction in this way, and as for narcissus, it is agreeable to find the number of offspring which a single parent will supply after one season. There is an avarice in human nature which enjoys getting something for nothing.

I was surprised to find that a fine amateur gardener of my acquaintance was unaware of a simple method of increasing her own lilies, so perhaps it may be worth suggesting to other people. Instead of buying a very few lily bulbs at several shillings a dozen, as we did in the old days when they were still available, it is easy to produce hundreds, even thousands, for nothing but the cost of our own labour and three years' worth of patience. There are several ways of doing this. Either you may take up an old bulb and, pulling it to pieces, set each separate scale in a box filled with sandy compost, or you may allow the seed pod to ripen and then sow the seeds in sandy drills out of doors. That superb and most satisfactory lily, regale, will give you not thousands but hundreds of thousands of seed capsules on a single head. Paper-thin, they are packed with a neatness no professional packer could rival; the maximum of delicacy and prodigality in the minimum of space. The slitting open of this miracle of compression is not the least part of the pleasure to be obtained.

Then there are the black buttons asking to be stripped from the stems of certain lilies, notably the tough old tiger lily of cottage gardens. Each one of these will grow as freely as mustard and cress and indeed may be observed waving a pale little wormlike root in the air in an urgent desire for a separate life long before it has been harvested by the gardener or has fallen to the ground of its own accord. Save these and sow them.

Save also, economically, the seeds of some annuals. Get an old tobacco tin and pour a muddle into it: Iceland poppy, love-in-a-mist, eschscholtzia, violas, whatever offers you its generosity. These can be scattered broadcast next month or in the spring of next year. There is no need to spend money when the free supply is available.

WAR IN THE COUNTRY

August 1940

A new phrase creeps into the letters of friends and acquaintances living in some parts of England, Scotland and Wales. It varies little in the wording and is clearly apologetic rather than boastful in intention. It runs, "You would scarcely believe, here, that a war is going on." Apologetic though the remark may be, it is slightly irritating to those who in a different "here" are daily made very well aware that a war is going on. "Things are very quiet up here," writes one of my correspondents; "an occasional plane comes over but not much else." One hesitates whether to feel annoyed and envious or superior and scornful.

On the whole, one feels none of these things but is merely interested to observe one's own attitude and that of the country people around one. There is a volume to be written on the subject, better left to Miss E. M. Delafield's pen than to mine. No doubt she has already been occupied for some time in taking notes; I hope so. For my own part I can record only the effect that war has on us down, not up, here. Meaning somewhere in Kent.

I should like the German war lords to be swallows on the wires, observing our panic-stricken rural population. The morning begins without interruption. One is allowed one's breakfast in peace. Then towards midday the local siren goes off, setting up its banshee plaint across the fields. The English genius for understatement has already given it various nicknames: Moaning Mollie, Wailing Winnie, Tiresome Timmy—it is interesting to note how persistent is the primitive instinct for alliteration. But its most descriptive nickname, to my mind, is "that thing." People engaged in their normal occupations of harvesting, hoeing, fruit picking, cock their ears for a moment to listen and then say, "There's that thing again," and then return to their ploy. "That thing," if it is ever honoured with a more specific name, is called the "cyrene."

Among the many wonderments provoked by this war, I wonder why so many people should pronounce "siren" as "cyrene." Perhaps they are right and I wrong, but I cannot believe it.

We do not pay much attention to the "cyrene" in the country. It is just "that thing" to which we have become accustomed. Then the planes arrive. They fly overhead in a great flight like geese, and people looking up from the fields wonder vaguely whether they are Germans or ours. We then observe that one goose has become detached from the flight and that two fighters are tumbling round it in the summer sky. Machine guns crackle. The goose wavers in its flight; it banks; it sinks; it is wounded; its great wings flag; we hear later that it has come down at Appledore, ten miles away.

The only effect, apart from a pleasurable excitement among those on the ground, is that one gets into the habit of listening a little more carefully and of sniffing cautiously at any suspicious smell. When you are listening subconsciously all the time for the "cyrene" to go off you discover how many country sounds can bear a resemblance to that serviceable piece of mechanism. The bray of a donkey, the howling of a dog, the crow of a rooster, the purr of a threshing machine, all suffice to produce a momentary start of attention before they are dismissed for what they are. As for country smells, somebody very sensibly observed that they were so varied you couldn't possibly detect gas even if it were about, what with fertilizers and bone meal and sulphur on the hops. Still, one sniffs.

Two remarks made to me last Sunday may serve to illustrate the attitude of panic-stricken Kent. One was made by the local air warden, inquiring by telephone whether any bomb or plane had fallen in or near my garden. It was thought likely and, if so, should be reported. When I reassured her she exclaimed with real concern, "But surely you didn't miss the dog-fight! They were just like butterflies flying round each other, lovely to watch." Butterflies ... Well. The air warden is a naturalist.

The other remark was of a more practical nature. We had just counted a third wave of forty bombers and fighters roaring past, leaving white streamers like the wake of ships across the blue. "Please, madam," said a quiet voice, "would you like luncheon out of doors? Then you could watch the fights better."

BOOKS BY V. SACKVILLE-WEST

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[End of *Country Notes in Wartime*, by V. Sackville-West]