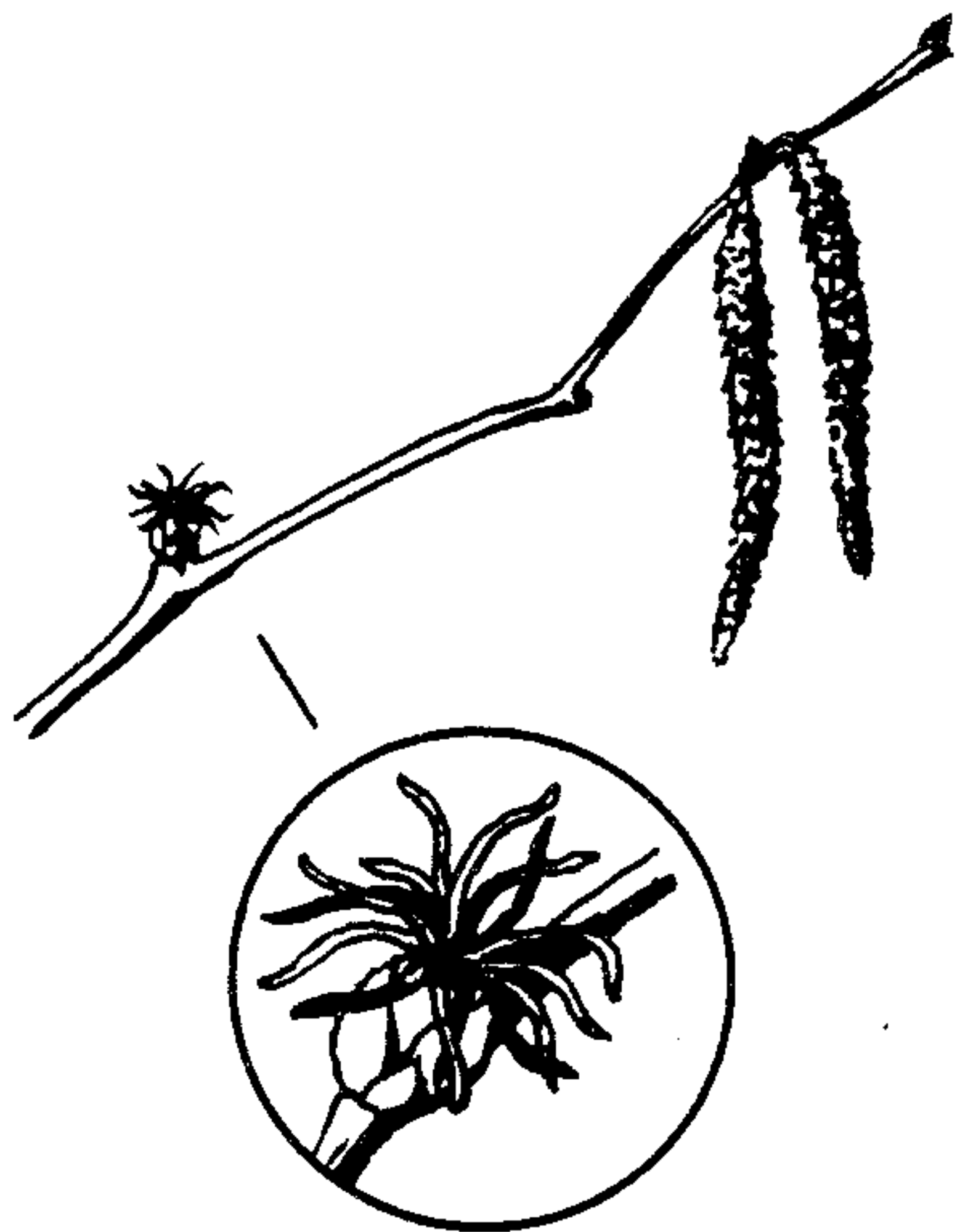


LOOK AGAIN !

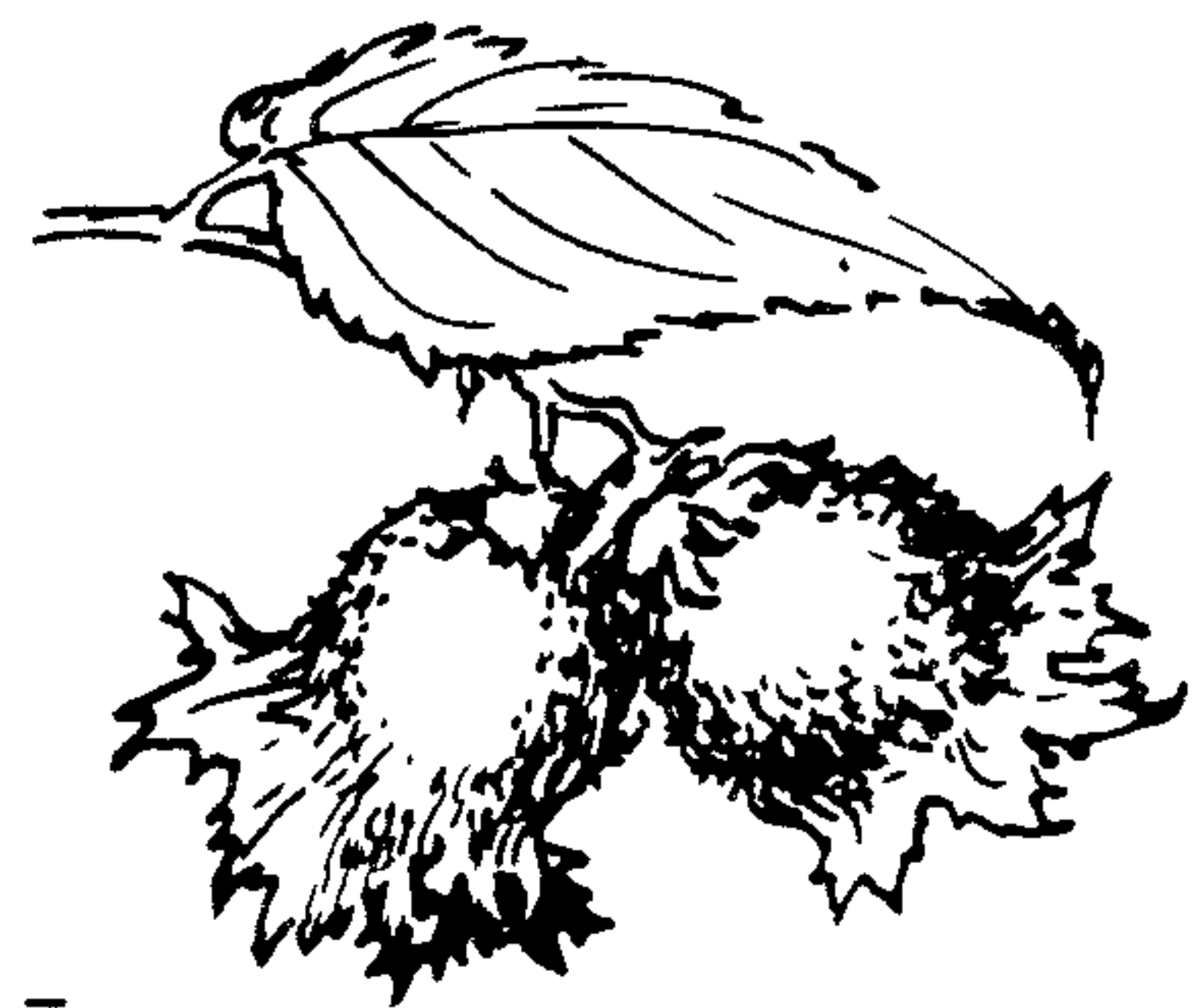
Without leaves or flowers, winter identification of woody plants depends principally on examination of the twigs, with their buds and other features. Carrying on this activity into late February brings with it the chance of coming upon the blossoms of one of the very earliest-blooming shrubs of the year, the hazel.



The staminate catkins are not especially remarkable, looking pretty much like those of other members of the birch family; it is the pistillate flowers that are worthy of a close look (use a hand lens, for they really are tiny). These flowers are gathered into clusters and even at this late stage are almost entirely concealed by bud scales. All that protrudes is a bunch of stigmas - less than three millimeters long, but a glistening ruby-red. Were it not for their small size, the astonishing color would make them light up the late winter woods like lanterns.

The flowers do not, however, help us to decide whether we are looking at American hazel (Corylus americana) or beaked hazel (C. cornuta), so if we wish to know we must go back to studying the twigs. There the evidence is plain, but don't put the lens away. The twigs of C. americana will be densely beset with bristles and stalked glands, while those of C. cornuta will be smooth or at most will have a few scattered soft hairs.

Final proof of their identity will not come until fall, when the faintly pungent nuts - sometimes called filberts - ripen, but it is very positive! Hidden by the scales beneath the red stigmas were minute bracts, and these have now grown enormously, the pair subtending each flower forming an involucre to completely enclose the nut. In C. americana they resemble leaves, with their raggedly cut edges, but in C. cornuta they fuse together and are prolonged far beyond the nut into a narrow, tubular beak.



Dick Smith