

# A Striking Novel by H. E. Bates

In "Spella Ho" He Tells With Vivid Art the Story of a Dominating Man's Rise to Power

**SPELLA HO.** By H. E. Bates. 382 pp. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. \$2.50.

By JANE SPENCE SOUTHRON

IT is the greatest joy to feel justified in putting on one side all contemporary world tangles, political and social, to concentrate on a literary work of art brimful of the sort of human interest that never stales or gets out of date and is startlingly original to boot.

Mr. Bates, though only thirty-three years of age, has a pageful of titles to his credit—and to his credit in every sense. "Spella Ho" would seem, decidedly, to top the lot. It has a protagonist who has no prototype in literature; though, so far as actual life is concerned, most people will feel he is a kind of man vouched for by experience; a sort of Beethoven of business; rugged, moody, dreamy, incalculable, instinctive and deriving impetus from his relations with women but motivated, fundamentally, by a primitive urge that compels him to fulfill himself. He has a doggedness that is not far from Napoleonic, an impressive ugliness that recalls Oliver Cromwell but which life works upon to produce a final appearance that, we are told, is "almost aristocratic"—the "almost" being a compliment rather than the man than to aristocracy.

He has a fatal fascination for women and, besides casual encounters that satisfy only one

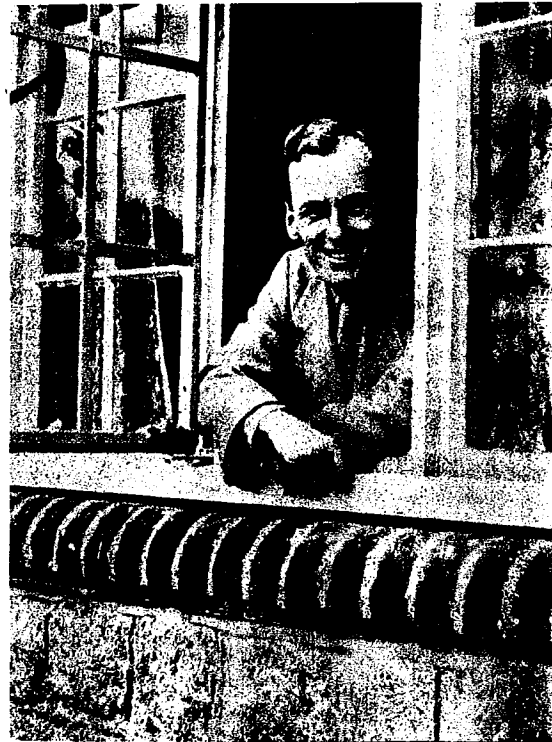
side of his nature and leave him virtually unaltered, there are four, all as different from each other as it is possible for women to be, who exercise extraordinary influence, beneficent and apparently though perhaps not really baneful, over his life. Without them he could hardly have become what he was to become or have done what he did; though that is only to say that he took, in somber imperativeness, what he needed from life. A fated, dominant man. With it all he has, to begin with, a handicap scarcely surpassable: at 20 he could neither read nor write.

It is a queer book, full of queer folk, queer emotions and mental states and reactions and queer situations; but there is nothing that is bizarre. It is the queerness of life itself that is caught and fixed, in instantaneous literary photography, by a writer attracted less to the commonplace than to the exceptionally unusual; and the queerness is given an everyday aspect by the ordinariness of the background—an English township changing, as was many an American one during the same years, from mid-nineteenth century material backwardness to what we, today, style modernism.

The queerest thing in the book is, as in life, the queerness of contrast! Bruno Shadbelt, at 20, ingrainedly dirty because he has never realized the need for

washing; half-starved, fiercely determined to save his fanatically honest old mother from perishing of cold, creeping up to the great house, "Spella Ho," that stood above Caster, and stealing coal. At the other end of his long life we watch him, a fine old man who has made Caster and bought the beautiful mansion in its magnificent acreage, patiently and with characteristic modesty replying to the pert criticism of a young woman who, with modern sureness, relegates his lifework to a nothing summed up in hideousness. There is, he feels, "no record" of anything beautiful he has produced; but the record is there in himself—a grand old man wrought, through the divine spark of hidden genius, from a boorish, lumpish human creature lower than peasant and almost as inarticulate as the earth he trod on.

And there is the contrast between his women. The fairly young widow, "easy and just a little flash," to whom he sold stolen coal and who taught him to wash and roused in him the first wholly unexpected rush of physical passion; and Lady Virginia, an idealist, who, much later, appealed to every side of the man and whom he was to have married but for the strange waywardness of fate. Before that there had been gentle, devoted Louise—who, more than any of them, set him free by helping him



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along the first painful stages of the road to education; Gerda, the warmly passionate German wife of a stupid English doctor, who was torn from him by an impelling personal longing; and Italian Jenny, the lovely but meretricious dancer who egged him on to carry out materialistic schemes that made him rich, but were entirely against the grain.

Hardly less important are the

men who meant so much to him in his career and the miserly old woman who gave him, at "Spella Ho," which changes hands four times during the story, his first monetary start. But, all said, it is his delineation of physical passion in its countless variations and permutations that is Mr. Bates's most outstanding contribution to fiction in his latest novel.