

# Progress by Brute Force

*SPELLA HO.* By H. E. Bates. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1938. \$2.50.

**M**R. BATES tells the story of Bruno Shadbolt's way with women and of his way with money,—a dual progress that began in a village of the English Midlands, in a fireless hovel, almost within shadow of the great fifty-chimneyed house of Spella Ho, and that ended in the great house itself. The chronicle runs from 1873 to 1931, from the day that Bruno's mother died in a state of abject poverty and intransigent honesty, when he was twenty, to the years when he was Spella Ho's rich and lonely master. It follows Bruno's rise step by step, and woman by woman, from his illiterate and brutish beginnings, through stages only slightly more literate and



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slightly less brutish, to his triumphant and meaningless ending.

Whether Mr. Bates intended to charge this ending with more significance than it seems to have, or whether he was merely intent upon expressing the final nullity of his hero's long career, is hard to say; but it is fairly plain, we think, that he has not managed to make of Bruno Shadbolt the figure that he meant to make. He conceived of him, apparently, as an incarnation of primitive force, working dumbly, almost blindly, but irresistibly towards a goal of which he himself was only half-aware, ignoring certain obstacles because he never guessed at their existence, and overcoming others by his inarticulate will and the directional thrust of his instinct. But what we have is a less interesting and less convincing figure. At least half the time we feel that Bruno is acting to satisfy an author's pattern,

rather than from inner compulsion, and a good deal of the time we do not believe in Bruno at all. As for his worldly progress, it goes by fits and starts, and the motive power seems to be dumb luck at least as often as dumb force. We are told that he made money out of land and gas and motor busses and the hotel business and movies and iron, but we feel that these successes are due more to Mr. Bates's determination than to the urgencies of Bruno's character. So, too, with Shadbolt's power over women: we are assured that he had such power, but his creator does not quite convince us of its reality, and its nature eludes us. Superlative virility explains much, but not all.

Mr. Bates is an accomplished artist in the short story form, and it may be that his partial failure in the present instance—if we are right in believing that he has scored a partial failure—is due to the inadequacy of a short story technique when confronted by the demands of a novel which aims at depth and scope. In the short story, character may be drawn with a few deft strokes; there is seldom space in which to do more. But that treatment is not enough for a novel's characters with whom we are asked to live through many pages. After our first view of them, we desire to know them in the round. The characters of "Spella Ho," almost without exception, are never seen so.

Then, there is the matter of time. The short story writer usually fixes upon a significant moment in the life or lives of an individual or a group; more often than not, he is unconcerned with duration. But the novelist whose story moves through many years must, if he is to be successful, make his readers experience a feeling of time passing. This Mr. Bates has not done. We are told that Bruno grew older, the dates assure us that he must have, but we have little sense of the passage of time until the narrative has carried us from the year 1873 down to about 1912. In sum, the novel—particularly a novel of the range of "Spella Ho"—requires a more complicated organization and a more profound integration than the short story. Effective tableaux and incidents are not enough. Mr. Bates remains a master of picture and incident.

If anybody should be misled by our remarks into thinking that "Spella Ho" is not an entertaining book, we should be sorry. Mr. Bates is too expert in the management of words not to be entertaining, and the reader who follows Bruno Shadbolt's career will meet many rewards along the way. "Spella Ho" is lively, sometimes moving, fiction; but, because of a technique that is unequal to the larger requirements of the task undertaken, it is something less than the novel that it might have been, that its author undoubtedly intended it to be.