

Endurable Fragments in France

FAIR STOOD THE WIND FOR FRANCE. By H. E. Bates. Boston: Little Brown & Co. An Atlantic Monthly Press Book. 1944. 270 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

SEVERAL years ago, on a motion picture lot, a writer rushed up to an executive and said: "Got a great idea for an opening for a murder mystery. Body's found on the railroad tracks, cut in two. Great detective's called in, and first thing he finds is that lower half of body is that of a boy of seventeen, while upper half is that of a man of seventy. —You take it from there."

Mr. Bates's novel exhibits no division as neat or remarkable as the one suggested by the Hollywood humorist, but it is definitely not of a piece. Readable and absorbing as it all is, part of it is readable as writing that aspires to be literature, and succeeds, while the remainder of it is readable as fiction of the now popular escape-from-German-occupied-territory school. One can have no quarrel with the author's choice of subject, or with his handling of it through the better part of his narrative; it is only when he slips from sincerely thoughtful writing into an overworked and somewhat slovenly pattern that one suffers disappointment and is moved to protest. After which one reads on, still pulled by the tow of the yarn, but on a different level. Fortunately, however—and let it be emphasized—the change occurs late.

"Fair Stood the Wind for France" is the story of John Franklin, R. A. F. bomber pilot and captain of a Wellington crew. We meet him in the third summer of the war when he is flying back across the Alps after completing a mission to northern Italy. Behind him is almost a year of active operations, beginning with Bremen and Cologne; and of his crew of four sergeants, three have been with him all this time. Behind him is fear, that he has learned to screen even from himself. Behind him is the learned "habit of foreshortening the focus of his mind: so that he never looks forward beyond the next moment of darkness." He has learned "never to anticipate the flak, the searchlights, the exciting terror of the target, the journey home," and in this way "the hell has been broken up into endurable fragments." Behind him, between operations, is a lot of drinking and a lot of dancing and love-making, all calculated to hold back "tides of apprehension and pain"; behind him, "screaming nights in the local towns, crashing traffic lights, with girls screaming in the back of the car,



H. E. Bates

everyone having a wizard time. Wizard: the word has grown crusts on it. What fun!" John Franklin, at the age of twenty-two, thinks that he has a sizable chunk of life behind him. He does not know that a broken airscrew, a crash landing in Occupied France, a severed artery in his left arm, and the beginning of a new and more meaningful life lie just a few minutes ahead.

In the new life an arm is lost and a girl is found, and long steps are taken towards John Franklin's maturity. In the French farmhouse where he finds refuge, among the people who succor him, he comes to see war and power, and life and death, as he has not seen them before. ("Franklin looked at the revolver and saw it suddenly as a pathetic and useless thing. He saw his own belief in it as pathetic. He had become so used to handling a weapon as big as a house, and carrying enough power to wipe out a small town, that he had forgotten there are other sorts of power. He looked at the three people sitting in the lamplight waiting for a sound. He saw them, the three generations of one nation, as part of a defenseless people, as part of the little people possessing an immeasurable power that could not be broken. He saw them suddenly as little people who had lain on the ground and had their faces trampled on but whose power was still unbroken. He knew it clearly now as a more wonderful, more enduring, and more inspiring power than he had ever believed possible: the power of their own hearts.")

Mr. Bates tells the story simply, but with little or none of the pretentious "simplicity" paraded by writers who follow Hemingway at too great a distance. He is particularly skilful in the

communication of physical sensations—indeed, he is body-conscious to a remarkable degree—and the sensitive reader will often feel a probe go home. He is skilful, too, in the creation of suspense, and in the precise, measured, slow-motion writing that can increase almost to the breaking-point the tension of a dramatic scene. John Franklin, in the story's telling, grows from a mere name into a character of considerable substance; while the other airmen matter not at all, with the exception of O'Connor who, to my mind, serves the novel ill rather than well. Françoise, the girl, does not grow, because she is complete to begin with—strong, true, loving, tender, capable, courageous. If any captious critic objects that such a character is a mere dream-girl, let him take a look at some of literature's most successful heroines.

As to the pattern of the story, it is enough to have suggested its nature without reducing it to a synopsis that might rob some readers of the pleasures of discovery and surprise. It is often a deeply moving story, always an exciting one. And the reading public may rest assured that whatever Mr. Bates has to say about war flying is the "pukka gen." For this is the same H. E. Bates whose "There's Something in the Air" was reviewed in these pages about a year ago; the same H. E. Bates who was commissioned "Flying Officer X" by the British Government, in the summer of 1941, and given the run of the Bomber Command so that he might study the men of the Royal Air Force in the air and on the ground.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT: No. 48

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. The solution to Crypt No. 48 will be found in the next issue.

QDHPBLAC ELFG IJK BQQ-
MGNBAGM, LC OLKBDALQ,
KEG EJRLA SBAM; OGLCDA,
KEGT CLT, IGQDAH C KD RLA;
IJK QGK KEGR XODFG BK BN
KEGT PLA.

—VDALKELA CZBNK.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 47
THE KATYDID WORKS HER
CHROMATIC REED ON THE
WALNUT-TREE OVER THE
WELL.

—WALT WHITMAN.
—SONG OF MYSELF.