

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1933.

## MY BEGINNING

by H. E. BATES

I think it must have been on a January day in 1922 when I went to be interviewed for a job as a journalist with the insane notion at the back of my head that this was the quickest way of becoming a writer. It may have been February, for I remember that the sun was quite warm and that the little, mean, dirty, pink-eyed fellow who interviewed me kept referring in what he himself would have called "glowing terms" to the approaching spring, telling me that the best time of the year for the young journalist was just coming, with garden parties, tennis parties, flower shows and regattas for him to visit free and hardly any meetings to keep him indoors at night. I think he told me it was a great profession too. At any rate, he offered me ten shillings a week and I took it.

When I turned up at the office of the newspaper on the following Monday morning it was locked and deserted. It was cold and I mooned about, stamped my feet, looked in the shops, and felt thoroughly wretched. It was not until eleven that my boss turned up—indeed it must have been after eleven, for his breath was rank and powerful and his eyes already bleary. He unlocked the office, told me to sweep up, changed his mind, locked up the office again and told me to go along with him to the police station.

Subsequently, every morning, I had to go along to the police station. I was young and green and I wanted to be a writer. What had I to do with police stations? I

had written some poems and I daresay I was proud of myself. "Anything doing?" I used to say to the sergeant. That man was responsible for arousing in me a contempt of the police which I have not yet lost. "Three bloody murders," he used to say, "and a bleeding robbery." And then: "'Ere! 'Eard this one?" From the police station I used to go on wearily to the coroner's. Again I used to say, "Anything doing?" Here "Anything doing?" meant "Has anyone shot himself, drowned himself, or died in fishy circumstances?" Very often someone had and it was part of my job to go along to the address with a conspicuous notebook and interview the relations. I had not then read *The Doctor's Dilemma*, but when I did I appreciated fully the bitterness of Shaw's jibe at the profession of journalism; it would have given me a kind of venomous pleasure to have written that line.

Back at the office I used to write up my stuff wearily, sick at heart. I felt a great desire to write stylishly, elaborately, and I was idiotic enough to write my reports like that. I was very laborious, miserably conscientious. But above all I was beginning to hate the job. The office was filthy, the paper was cheap, and two or three times a day everything used to be made filthier and cheaper by the sudden appearance of my boss, who used to rush in, seize a heap of paper, sit down at the table without removing his scarf or hat, and write as furiously and desperately as though the King had been assassinated or the Prime Minister had eloped with a barmaid. He took not the faintest notice of me. At intervals he used to swivel round suddenly in his chair and spit beerily, with guttural snorts, at the fire. His journalism was bad, but his aim was a thousand times worse, and the greasy yellow phlegm used to hit the mantelpiece or the wall or the fire-tongs, sizzling whenever it struck something hot. Finally he used to look up and yell at me: "Why the

bloody hell don't you go *out*? Go out and nose round—find something—make something up—go on, for God's sake."

It was a dreary town, one of those jumped-up towns, of which the Midlands are full, where jerry-built houses in long streets pierce farther and farther into the surrounding country, carrying with them their deadly dreariness. In the heart of it were bits of slum that might have been transported from the East End of London. I used to wander about a bit in them—but what I saw I never reported. I did not realise until afterwards that it would have been the easiest way of getting myself the sack, which I wanted more than anything. Before the spring, however, I was out of journalism. I could endure the spitting and the swearing, but I could not endure the lecture on morality and conscience which my boss suddenly delivered to me half-drunkenly one April morning, and I was working in a leather warehouse, very happily, before another month was out.

I have related all this because there seems to exist among my critics, reviewers, readers and collectors the notion that I am a countryman and a pure-bred countryman at that. Since my work has been largely lyrical in tone and rural in atmosphere the conclusion seems to be that I was born and brought up in a house very like that I have described in *The Two Sisters*, and that I have spent my life musing dreamily in harvest fields and pastoral landscapes. Nothing could be more fantastic. What I know of the country I know by instinct and by inheritance. My forefathers on both sides were vagabonds and good-for-nothings who lived precariously on the fish they caught and the mushrooms they picked and the rabbits they snared on other men's estates. I inherit more than a drop of their blood. Nevertheless, I am, like my parents, town-bred, and I have lived a town-life for twenty-five

years, though I am not denying that I have hated very nearly every minute of it. If I am a countryman at all I am a countryman at heart. My skin is town stuff.

I give these facts to the bibliographer for what they are worth, to the collector in the hope that he will not only collect my books but read them, and, finally, to the aspiring young writer as a warning not to enter into the realm of journalism with the insane notion, as I did, that he will learn to write there.