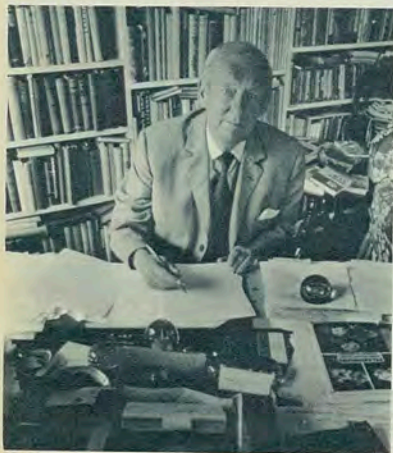


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Continuing our moving new series in which six famous writers describe their great moments of self-discovery

THE MOMENT THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

Have you ever wondered what makes a man—or a woman—into a writer? Did you think, perhaps, that writers were different from other mortals, set apart from birth, blessed—and cursed—with an imperious genius that would not let them rest? This week H. E. Bates, hailed by the critics as one of the greatest short story writers of our time, tells how a chance encounter transformed him from the laziest, most ordinary of schoolboys into a master of modern fiction. And, together with this moving account of personal fulfilment, we are publishing one of the finest examples of his achievement, the short story "Go, Lovely Rose" (see page 44). H. E. Bates has been writing prolifically ever since he published his first book at the age of twenty, and his novels have been translated into sixteen languages. Many of his stories—like those about the irrepressible, unforgettable Larkins—are set in the rich Kent countryside where he himself has lived for the past forty years.



IF YOU HAD ASKED ME, as the holocausts of the First World War at last came to an end, what I wanted to be in life, I shouldn't have had the remotest idea as to what to answer. I was fourteen at the time, and I do not recall that there had ever been kindled in me the slightest spark of ambition. I was content to kick a football about in winter, go hunting for birds' nests in spring and play cricket in summer. "Lethargic," my Latin master called me, and Lethargic, by Heaven, I certainly was.

How long this lethargy of mine might have lasted if it hadn't been for a strange twist of circumstances in the autumn of 1919, it is impossible to say. But I believe it to be true, as Shakespeare said, that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will", and in the September of that year that divinity suddenly manifested itself in the most remarkable way and began to work for me and for my destiny.

On almost the first day of that autumn term, with the young Bates sunk deep in his habitual lethargy, there walked into the formroom of the lower fifth an arresting and remarkable figure—that of a new master. Though still young, he nevertheless gave the impression that he was far older than he really was. There were three reasons for this. First, he limped very badly. This was because his legs were full of shrapnel, the final chunk of which at last worked its way out of the flesh no less than fifty years later. Secondly, several of his fingers were missing. Thirdly, his face was so woefully scarred that you could have been forgiven for supposing that he had been beaten up by a drunken navy's shovel.

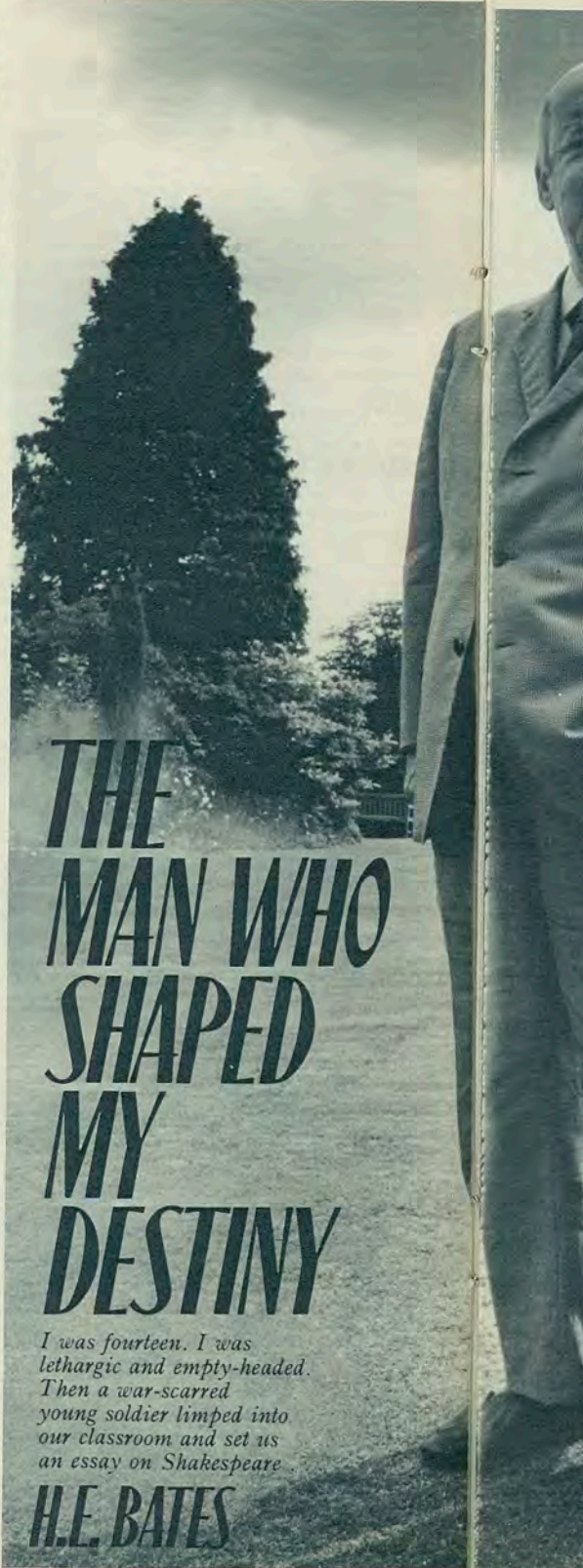
All this was accompanied by no hint whatever of self-pity. On the contrary, the man exuded an arresting air of quiet self-confidence. Here was no martyr home from bloody battlefields; nor was this a hero about to tell stirring tales of stirring deeds of war. A remarkable reticence, touched by the slightest irony, was manifest in all he said and did.

This young infantry captain, soldier from the wars returning, was to teach us English. Until that morning I do not recall that I was particularly interested in English as a subject, but as the young ex-soldier began to talk in his own particularly reticent but commanding way, I suddenly felt the scales of lethargy falling from my eyes. It would indeed be no exaggeration to say that there was suddenly borne down on me a light from heaven. Within minutes I was newly awake.

To all that was said in that English lesson I listened in complete fascination, utterly enthralled. Our immediate appointed task, presently appeared, was to write an essay on Shakespeare. I knew little or nothing of Shakespeare. Nor, apparently, did the young master want to hear it anyway. He already knew that Shakespeare had been born in Stratford-on-Avon in 1564, that he had written *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, and all the rest of it. He begged us not to tell him about it all over again. He urged us, instead, to use our imaginations, and write about Shakespeare.

I duly wrote my essay. Whether it was good or bad I have now no means whatever of knowing. What I do know is that in the process of writing it I grew up. That is to say, I not only grew up, but I grew up—as by a miracle—into what I was to be. The sloth of lethargy, in which there had been no hint of ambition, was suddenly shed like a dead snake-skin. Ambition suddenly shone like a beacon. I knew that I not only wanted to be, but had to be, a writer.

During the next few weeks the pages of English literature, our beloved and incomparable inheritance, began to be opened up to me: not only Shakespeare, but Herrick, Marvell, Donne, Milton, Keats, Shelley and all the rest of our royal court of poets. I choked over their beauties, intoxicated as by a first love. At the same time I was also carried away by the



THE MAN WHO SHAPED MY DESTINY

I was fourteen. I was lethargic and empty-headed. Then a war-scarred young soldier limped into our classroom and set us an essay on Shakespeare

H.E. BATES



Photographs by Chris Holland

I believe it to be true, as Shakespeare said, that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends Rough-hew them how we will."

splendors of the Authorized Version of the Bible—in particular the Book of Isaiah—and then further by some of Milton's prose works. This first taught me the truth that poetry need not necessarily appear dressed in regular rhyme and rhythm, but can possess an equal beauty and nobility in prose.

Nor was this all. I now not only read poetry. Amazingly, I also began writing it. Inevitably much of what I wrote was bad, but this scarcely mattered. What mattered was that my new, woken self had found the key to self-expression. It is not too much to say, indeed, that in the months of that autumn and winter, under the guidance of the young war-scarred soldier-teacher, I was really alive for the first time. And beyond all shadow of doubt I had become determined that, come hell or high water, I was going to be a writer.

So can a twist of circumstance change a

life. I have said I was entirely without ambition. I will now qualify this by saying that, even before being fired by the powerful determination to be a writer, I had a hankering—it was scarcely an ambition—to be a painter. It is therefore not impossible that if, instead of the soldier-teacher convinced that his purpose in life was to teach English, there had arrived on my horizon someone equally convinced that his vocation was to teach painting, my life might well have been changed just as dramatically—though in a different way.

After expressing these same thoughts not long ago, I received a touching letter from a lady who wrote: "You need never regret that you didn't become a painter. You are a painter in words." And this—ever since that quiet young captain walked into my life to change it for ever—is what I have tried to be. So is my ambition satisfied.



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