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H. E. BATES- BY HIMSELF

When H. E. Bates, author of *Fair Stood the Wind for France* and creator of the Larkins, short story writer and essayist, died in January he was 68. But he had been a prolific and successful author for almost 50 years, for his first novel was published when he was only 20. This, one of the last pieces he ever wrote, defines his methods . . . and serves, unhappily, as his own obituary

In my teens I wanted very much to be a painter. At that time I used to spend hours copying various pictures that hung on the walls of my parents' house and I even took a short course of painting lessons with a lady who charged me, if I remember correctly, sixpence an hour, a sum I could just about afford, but only just. It didn't take me very long, however, to realise that I had no talent as a painter. I was an awful bungler.

Happily this realisation was succeeded by a desire, indeed a passionate, single-minded desire, to be a writer. I began to read avidly in all directions: all the poetry I could lay my hands on, Conrad, Hardy, Maugham, together with a strange motley collection which included William Le Queux, E. Phillips Oppenheimer, Sheila Kaye Smith, Conan Doyle, P. G. Wodehouse and heaven knows who else. My father was also an avid reader, not least of such magazines as *The Strand*, *The Windsor*, *The Harmsworth* and others that have long since disappeared from the publishing scene. All these he used to have bound up in volume form and they were largely the foundation



H. E. Bates and his wife Marjorie. After his marriage in 1931 Bates went to live in Kent. During the war he served in the RAF, becoming a squadron leader, and he was to travel extensively . . . but Kent remained his home

on which my readership was built. At 17 I wrote a novel, a very bad, long-winded novel which I had sense enough to lock away in a drawer and forget. At 18 I began a second novel, and in the course of the next 12 months or so wrote three drafts of it. This novel, *The Two Sisters*, is still in print after 50 years and in fact has never been out of print in all that time. Unlike very many first novels it is in no degree autobiographical but is purely a work of imagination, although of my confused imagination I freely admit, but its merits or perhaps the potentialities of its author were spotted by Edward Garnett, then reader for the firm of Jonathan Cape, after ten other publishers had rejected it. It was subsequently published a few weeks before my 21st birthday.



Never really happy except when writing . . . H. E. Bates at home in Kent. An early realisation was that "if the word fiction means anything at all it means invention and if, in turn, invention means anything it means imagination"

As time went on my early desire to be a painter began to manifest itself in my way of writing. I began to realise that writing is just as much a graphic art as painting or drawing. I consequently began to paint in words, visually rather than discursively, and it is perhaps this quality in my work that has led to my being compared not

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once, but several times, with Renoir, a compliment I could scarcely wish to have improved upon.

Another early realisation, in addition to that of seeing that writing is also a graphic art, was that if the word fiction means anything at all it means invention and if in turn invention means anything it means imagination. It is therefore fidelity to imagination and not fidelity to observation, that is the true basis of the fiction writer's art. Thus my stories, and the people in them, are almost wholly bred in imagination, that part of the brain of which we really know so little, their genesis over and over again inspired by little things, a face at a window, a chance remark, the disturbing quality of a pair of eyes, the sound of wind on a sea-shore. From such apparent trivialities, from the merest grain of fertile seed, do books mysteriously grow.

During the late Twenties and early Thirties my reading horizons widened rapidly. Tolstoy, Chekov, Turgenev, Flaubert, Maupassant, Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson and countless others came on to the scene. All were fertile sources, perhaps none more than the American Stephen Crane, whose renowned *The Red Badge of Courage* provides the almost perfect example of the triumph of imagination. Crane's realistic and uncompromising picture of the bloody horrors of the American Civil War had been written years after that war was over. Crane had never been



In his garden with grand-daughter Emma. H. E. Bates had two sons, two daughters and nine grandchildren. Much as he loved travelling, his hobbies were essentially domestic . . . cricket, fishing and gardening

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remotely near the scene of battle but had used his imagination to such powerful effect that when the book appeared it roused raving ecstasies among English critics, causing them to compare Crane with Tolstoy, Zola . . .

When the time eventually came for me to write of another war, the Second World War of the RAF, France, India and Burma, I had perforce to follow Crane's example and while acutely observing what went on in those various theatres to invent almost all that happened in *Fair Stood the Wind For France*, *The Purple Plain*, *The Jacaranda Tree* and the stories of *Flying Officer X*. I had in fact to do what the truly imaginative writer always has to do - to make excursions

into the unknown, a task which, perhaps above all others, invests the writing of fiction with so much of its fascination. It may well be compared with a voyage of discovery in uncharted seas - or, as Hemingway put it, it is like being at sea alone in an open boat; you are out there on your own and nobody can help you.

Thus such voyages are never easy; often they extend over a considerable range of time. I had a singular instance of this with a story called *The Triple Echo*, first published as a three-part serial in this magazine and which became a film in 1972. I had conceived this story in 1943. At first its basic idea seemed to be good: the story of two sisters struggling to run a

small hillside farm, without much help, in wartime. To this farm comes a young soldier, bored, sick of army life, parades, schemes, bull and all the rest of it, offering to give, in off-duty hours, the help they need. As a result it isn't long before they both fall in love with him and there are clouds of acrimonious jealousy in the air.

All well and good, it seemed; yet the more I thought of the fundamental idea the more wrong it seemed to be. How or exactly where I found it quite impossible to determine - so impossible that I carried it around with me all through the war, to RAF stations, to France, to India, to Burma, and then beyond the war and half way round the world, always without

solution. Now and then I sat down and gave it coherent, objective, but always the problem remained to resolve itself or let me rest.

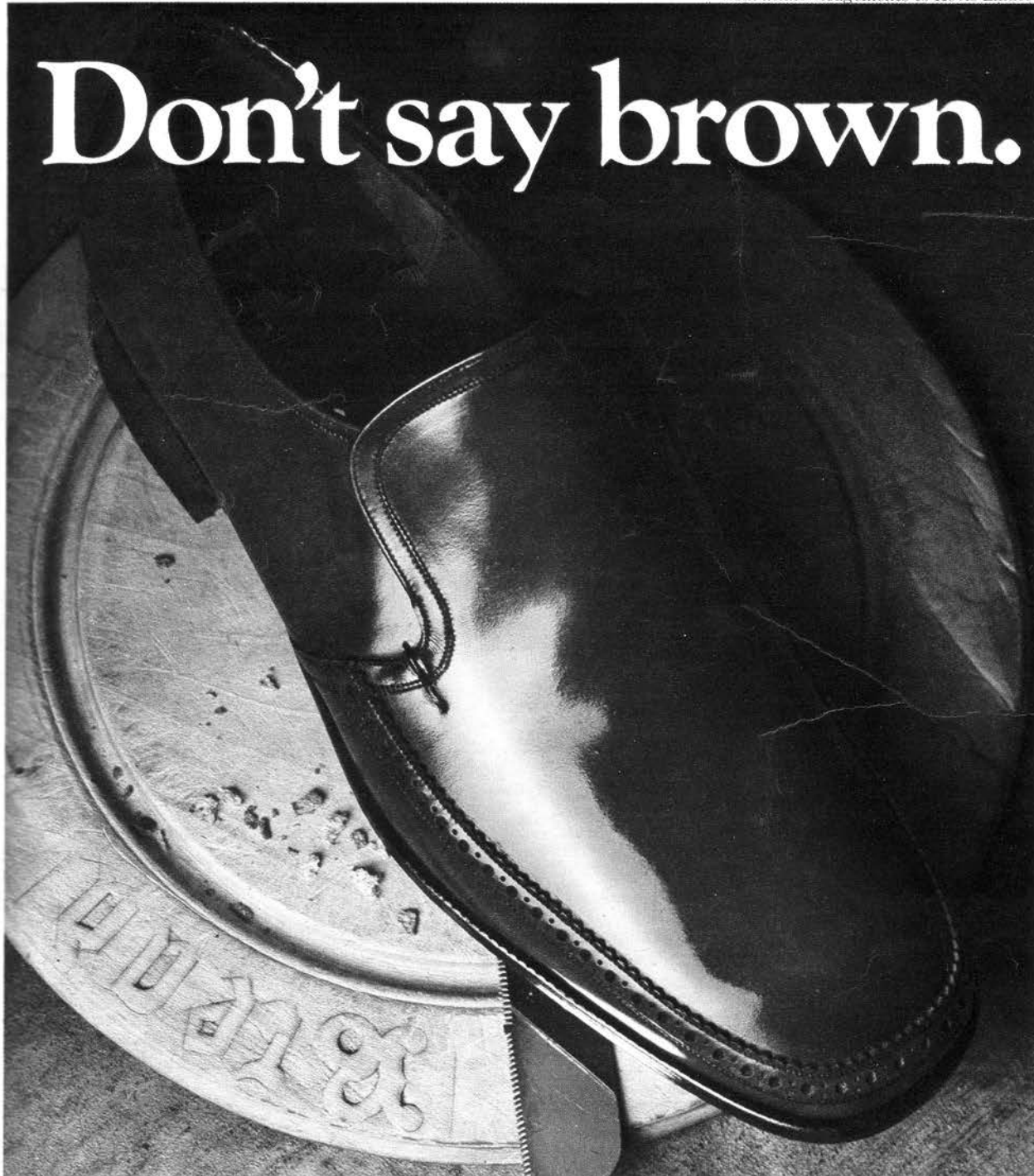
Then, in 1968, exactly a quarter of a century after the idea's first inception, I saw the solution as in a glass from a cloud. It struck me that I had one character more than I needed; namely one of the sisters. She was, so to speak, blood on the light. Instantly, as soon as I cut her out, the whole difficult was clear. Not that this was the whole solution. When the soldier deserts it becomes a problem for the remaining sister to solve, and not only to hide but to find him too. And for disguise she needs him as her sister, from which the stage is set for Greek tragedy.

All this was an exceptional case of stumbling and groping about, but I prefer it, of my own prolonged idleness. Not that stories always come in this obstinate fashion. There is an opposite condition in which, in the strangest way, a kind of solution takes over, producing a situation which what is set down on the page is later met, in all circumstances of real life. This has several times happened to me but never with any disturbing force and intuition. My story called *Summer in Salan* was a few years ago my wife and I spent a holiday on an island in the South Atlantic. The coastal fringes of the island are lush with tropical and subtropical flowers, fruit and vegetation. Inland, at a height of some 6000 feet, there exists another world, a world of treeless barren rock until the last year or two, by the hand of man. This chilling piece of nature haunts remorselessly, as if it were a terrestrial ghost invested with the power to terrorise.

Since I am deeply sensitive to the sphere and place I at once fell under the restless spell of this place, and in fact that I should enjoy it until I had woven a story around the scene. Accordingly I created a scene in which a bored, rich, selfish woman, recently divorced from her husband, arrives on the island to take a brief holiday. The tourist season being over, she has no one to talk to and finally

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H. E. Bates - the initial success of his first novel in 1905. His father came from a clerical background to Kettering Grammar School. He published his first novel, *The Sign of the Cross*, in 1911, and produced on average more than one book a year.

His wartime service in the Royal Air Force, as a squadron leader, resulted in a Distinguished Flying Cross and one of his successful films, *The Sandlot*, with Gregory Peck in the lead. He was also successful as a film director - *The Sandlot*, *The Ma Larkin*. Apart from his novels, he wrote many essays on country life, gardening, fishing and water sports, and two daughters.

H. E. Bates died in January 1985, a successful English writer.

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Then, in 1968, exactly a quarter of a century after the idea's first inception, I saw the solution as in a great light from a cloud. It struck me suddenly that I had one character more than I needed; namely one of the sisters. She was, so to speak, blocking the light. Instantly, as soon as I took her out, the whole difficult way became clear. Not that this was quite the whole solution. When the young soldier deserts it becomes necessary for the remaining sister to hide him and not only to hide but to disguise him too. And for disguise she dresses him as her sister, from which moment the stage is set for Greek tragedy.

All this was an exceptional example of stumbling and groping or, if you prefer it, of my own prolonged stupidity. Not that stories always behave in this obstinate fashion. There exists an opposite condition in which, in the strangest way, a kind of sixth sense takes over, producing a situation in which what is set down on the printed page is later met, in all accuracy, in real life. This has several times happened to me but never with quite the disturbing force and intuition as in a story called *Summer in Salandar*. Some few years ago my wife and I took a holiday on an island in the South Atlantic. The coastal fringes of the island are lush with tropical and sub-tropical flowers, fruit and vegetation, but inland, at a height of some 6,000 feet, there exists another world, a world of treeless barren rock untrudged, until the last year or two, by the foot of man. This chilling piece of land haunts remorselessly, as if it were some terrestrial ghost invested with a power to terrorise.

Since I am deeply sensitive to atmosphere and place I at once fell under the restless spell of this place, knowing in fact that I should enjoy no rest until I had woven a story to fit the scene. Accordingly I created a situation in which a bored, rich, highly selfish woman, recently separated from her husband, arrives on the island to take a brief holiday. The tourist season being over, she finds few people to talk to and finally takes

The Road to Success

H. E. Bates - the initials stand for 1905. His father came from a family of to Kettering Grammar School and clerk. He published his first novel, *The* duced on average more than one book a

His wartime service in the RAF, squadron leader, resulted in a series of and one of his successful novels, *The* with Gregory Peck in the leading role. success as a film - introduced the Ma Larkin. Apart from his novels, languages, and included *Fair Stood* the many essays on country life. He lived gardening, fishing and watching village and two daughters.

H. E. Bates died in January, aged 68, and successful English writers of the

refuge in the company of a young shipping clerk. In my endeavour to make her a person distinctive in name and manner I called her Mrs Vane and gave her a set of matching luggage, each piece imprinted with the letter V. In due course it amuses her to play with the young clerk as a cat plays with a mouse and inexorably, as remorseless as the terrestrial ghost he one day shows her from a distance, she finally destroys him.

A year later my wife and I went back to the island a second time. At Southampton, having some few minutes to spare before boarding our ship, I walked idly along the baggage bay, looking at the alphabetical line of letters above the waiting luggage. When I finally came to the letter V I saw there a set of matching bags, each piece imprinted with the letter V.

The ship was very full, so much so that on going to reserve our table in the dining saloon we were asked if we would mind sharing it with another person. We accordingly agreed, and presently found ourselves in the company of a precise replica of the Mrs Vane of my story: rich, selfish, bored, running away from her husband and looking for someone to play cat and mouse with. In due course she finds the necessary someone and proceeds, as remorselessly as the Mrs Vane of my story, to come as near to destroying him as makes no matter.

Thus can the mysterious processes of intuition, the strange powers of the sixth sense, take one nearer to the heart of truth than any amount of logical or rational thought. Such instances are not common, but they can and do happen. Nor do they by any means complete the varying ways by which a character may be built. There is a method which is neither intuitive nor inspired by a face, an apparently insignificant fact or a chance remark: a process combining both observation and imagination and resulting eventually in the composite portrait. Thus did the jovial Pop Larkin come into being, since Pop is not one person but ten, met or observed over a span of many years and finally welded, purely by imagination, into a living, credible whole.

To this category there also belongs the eccentric Miss Shuttleworth, who

Herbert Ernest - was born on May 16, Northamptonshire bootmakers. He went worked as a provincial journalist and *Two Sisters*, at 20. After that he pro- year.

during which he reached the rank of short stories signed "Flying Officer X"; *Purple Plain*, was made into a film, *The Darling Buds of May* - also a rumbustious family headed by Pop and which have been translated into 16 *Wind for France*, he wrote plays and in Kent and spent his spare time cricket. He was married, with two sons

recognised as one of the most prolific past half-century. □

appears in this issue in *The Proposal*. I have long had a weakness for eccentrics, especially female ones, of whom this country has a fair share. Among Miss Shuttleworth's enduring qualities are a fondness for talking to birds and flowers and a disarming candour when faced with pomposity, humourless solemnities or the orthodox church. Outwardly apparently batty she is in reality far saner than a great many people who would claim to be fully so. She delights in getting the local parson tight on her home-brewed wine, at the same time exhorting him to remember his Bible ("Take a little wine for thy stomach's sake" and "wine which makyth glad the heart of man") and taking more than a nip or two of

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comfort herself. In an over-stuffy
 world she is as refreshing as a breath
 of March wind.

In spite of these varying ways of
 creating characters, all of them involv-
 ing a considerable exercise of the
 imagination, there still exists a large
 body of opinion which resolutely
 believes and vows that characters are
 drawn straight from life.

I recall meeting a lady in a bar at
 Dover. She had been reading a new
 novel of mine. "My goodness, you've
 got her all right. Got her to a T. Plain
 as a pikestaff. I recognised her at
 once." When I asked to whom she was
 referring she said, "Why, Mrs S. You
 know her. She's often in here. You
 must have seen her a dozen times. Oh!

yes, you've got her all right. Uncanny."

Useless for me to point out that my
 novel wasn't set in Dover but in my
 native Northamptonshire, nearly two
 hundred miles away. Equally useless
 for me to try to explain that the sup-
 posed Mrs S. of the novel was wholly
 and purely a creature of my imagina-
 tion and bore no relationship to any-
 one, living or dead. I wouldn't have
 been believed anyway. Moreover it
 might even have been that I might
 have been suspected of some sort of
 swindle or even of not playing the
 game. Nevertheless I still prefer playing
 the game in my own intuitive, imagi-
 native way.

Page 63: *The Proposal*, one of the last
 short stories written by H. E. Bates

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