H. E. BATES: MY MOMENT OF SUCCESS

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His new novel, **The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold**, appears this month

MOMENT OF SUCCESS

The Gentleman At The Party

by H. E. BATES

"I did not suddenly wake up, thank heaven, to find myself prodigiously successful, and in fact I am bound to say that I have always been slightly sorry for authors who did . . . when novels of mine began to sell in hundreds of thousands . . . I hope and like to think that I kept my head about it."

DEEP in the English nature lies a strong suspicion, not to say a positive distrust, of too much success. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the world of letters, where many people feel that not only is it not quite nice, not quite done, to be as successful as Mr. Coward and Mr. Maugham, but also that financial success and pure artistic achievement and integrity cannot possibly go together. In their eyes too great a success is bound to taint, to lower automatically the levels of a writer's art and even to poison the sincerity of his intentions. A successful writer, for them, is never a good one.

To illustrate this I am fond of recounting an incident that happened to me at a party where a gentleman—quite uninvited and unasked, of course, as is the modern custom—suddenly advanced on me to give me his opinion of my work.

"I am bound to tell you, Bates," he said, "that I like your early work best. And I think I know why."

"Oh?" I said. "Why?"

"Because in those days," he said, "you were not writing for money. Now you are."

The inanity of this conversation is so great that it would not be worth recording if it did not throw some interesting light on my early career as a writer—the word "early" here not being a flippant one, since I was not much more than a schoolboy, and incidentally unemployed, when my first novel was written.

"You see it makes all that difference," said the gentleman at the party, "when you have to make your living as a writer."

Drive Of Necessity

There were several things I longed to point out to this voluntary critic of mine, the chief of them being that almost every one of the early stories he professed to admire so much had in fact been written more or less at the point of poverty pistol. In those days I really had to write in order to live. Such a story as *Alexander,* for example, a long, early idyll of mine for which the gentleman at the party professed much admiration, had been turned out in less than a week, at breakneck speed, simply because a publisher was standing over me with a threat, a dead-line and a cheque for twenty-five pounds—a fortune I badly needed—in his hand.

In the same way another often-admired early piece of mine, *The Mill,* had also been turned out at great speed because the prospect of a cheque for ten guineas was too wonderful to ignore—a prospect, in fact, that is still before me, since the editor who bought the story welshed on me and to this day has never paid. I do not think the gentleman at the party could possibly understand what the loss of that cheque meant to me. Nor would he, I am sure, be anything but horrified to feel that that tragic piece about a young girl betrayed as much by her parents as by her seducer had in fact been written because I needed money.

Ironically, in fact, *The Mill* has to this day never earned me a penny, though of all my stories it remains, perhaps, the solidest foundation stone on which my success as a writer of short stories, if I may call it that, was built. Around it were a great many other stories, built up with untiring labour over fifteen years or more and for none of which I do not think I ever received as much as fifteen pounds.

Sometimes in those days, in the late twenties or early thirties, I wrote as many as four or five stories a week, together with one or two or more book reviews, and perhaps an article or two. Often a story would be written between breakfast and lunch, followed by an article after lunch and a review in the evening. I did not dare let a story simmer in my mind, as I often do now, for weeks or months on end, until its problems solved themselves. Like Tchekov, Maupassant and O. Henry before me, I dashed off pieces with desperate rapidity for what I hoped were waiting editors. I had mouths to feed.

Printing Wild

In case it should be thought from all this that I approached everything I wrote in a commercial frame of mind I must here point out that no stories could in fact have been less commercial than mine. I wrote stories that had neither plot nor ending. They were sometimes described as being like Elizabethan lyrics in prose. I still write them; and now, as then, the writing of them gives me enormous pleasure.

Up to the outbreak of war no book of mine, I think I am right in saying, had ever sold more than five or six thousand copies and most of them much, much less. And when, in 1943, I achieved a certain wider success it was not of my seeking. I had joined the R.A.F. as the first state-commissioned short story writer in what I can only describe as a monastic frame of mind. I was quite content to put my private life as a writer behind me, which indeed I did, merely hoping that circumstances would prove favourable enough to enable me to pick it up again when war was over.

When eventually my commanding officer, a man very much given to fun, games and ironic quipping, sent for me and said, "What do you think, old boy? Those chappies over at M. of I. tell us that *The Greatest People in the World* may sell 100,000 copies. In fact, dammit, they've printed 'em," I thought he was joking. I had never heard of any book selling 100,000 copies, except perhaps *The Bible* and *Gone With the Wind.* In fact the book and its successor, *How Sleep the Brave,* sold a million copies, possibly more, leaving both publishers and the Treasury a little richer but *Flying Officer X* not a farthing better off, a fact which did not worry me very greatly.

In spite of these phenomenal figures I did not suddenly wake up, thank heaven, to find myself prodigiously successful, and in fact I am bound to say that I have always been slightly sorry for authors who did. Not a few, in fact, have shot themselves, especially in America, in the desperate aftermath that followed sudden best-sellerdom. I was happily never exposed to such dangers and when novels of mine began to sell in hundreds of thousands and to be translated into a score of languages I hope, and like to think, that I kept my head about it all.

THE SUCCESSFUL: H. E. Bates with Gregory Peck, for whom he is autographing a copy of his novel, The Purple Plain. *When the book was adapted into a film, it was Peck who played the leading part.*

But since, as I say, there is a type of mind that cannot possibly believe that success, integrity and quality can exist together there were inevitable head-shakings among some fellow authors who felt that some kind of corruption had now set in upon me—an attitude they similarly adopted, I noticed, in the case of Mr. T. S. Eliot, who was presently unwise enough to succumb to the temptation to write plays for the commercial theatre.

To this attitude a very distinguished novelist and critic confessed to me that he too had subscribed. "I felt it inevitable that success must have lowered the quality of your work", he said and then, being a man of much larger character than the gentleman at the party was honest enough to admit: "On the contrary I find, in *The Daffodil Sky* and *The Nature of Love,* for example, that exactly the reverse is true."

And why indeed should it not be? The notion that when an author's books are suddenly read by a large public the author himself should necessarily become the immediate prey of sinister and corrupting influences that reduce his work to levels of insincerity and cheapness is patently ridiculous. The gentleman at the party could not, of course, understand this. For him, a fair example of the literary snob, obscure authors are automatically good ones; successful ones are bad.

Nor would he, I think, make much of Trigorin's remark in *The Sea Gull.* Trigorin being, of course, a portrait of Tchekov himself. "A man writes," said Trigorin, "as he must and as he will"—after which there is really not much more to be said about writing.