The Man from Moose Jaw

H. E. BATES

The man from Moose Jaw — E., I shall call him — belonged to the era between the wars, the era of dislocation and distrust, of collapsing principles, of the indefinite groping forward to new and untested values.

He was an educated boy from Saskatchewan, in the Canadian Middle-west. He carried no six-shooters and there was no evidence that he even carried any malice. He was tall, shy, self-effacing, with an entrancing wit. His obvious virtues, in spite of his height, were not physical. As a product of colonization and a democratic system of education he seemed more cosmopolitan than English boys of the same age. It seemed quite in character that he should be a navigator.

The war was practically the last thing on which E. had anything to say. Books, education, films, philosophy, the price of whisky, the charm of Veronica Lake's coiffure — all seemed of more immediate importance than the job of bombing Hitler.

I had long discussions with him on Hemingway, Steinbeck, Bierce, *Life with Father*. I loaned him Silone's *Fontamara*, on the wrapper of which had been reprinted what I felt about that satirical picture of Fascist Italy. E. drank it neat, and you saw at once where his taste lay. It was for the delicate, the indirect, the sub-acid, the satirical, the witty.

But he had come 6,000 miles to fight, for a reason, obviously; a reason which, as a concrete declaration, never emerged. It was compounded of a great many reasons. Among other things he wanted to understand England better; he wanted England to understand Canada better.

The town in which we made occasional whoopee was Cambridge, for the survival of whose curiously monastic system of learning there was, I hoped, little chance after the war. E., who disliked intensely the few remaining students of that town who flowed about the streets with long colored scarves about their necks, was surprised that any Englishman could be so blasphemous.

We talked education in winter moonlight on the ancient market square, in sight of King's College Chapel, and it emerged that I also wanted state hospitals, state dentistry and state ownership of land.

E. was fascinated to find an Englishman whose prejudices were not deep-bitten with the scaly rust of tradition,

who did not feel that his country was "O. K. as it is," and who felt that Canada, still more the United States, could teach us something.

So we got on well together. We played cribbage on dark winter nights in the mess; we met on leave in London. It was bitterly cold; the quality of the food had slumped. We talked of the biggest steaks in the world: E.'s had been eaten in Montreal, two inches thick, two dollars; mine somewhere about Forty-second Street, New York, four inches thick, I forget how much.

It was cold in London; but it was colder, infinitely and more terribly cold, E. said, on the bridge across the Ontario River with the ice thick enough to bear a panzer division.

We talked till the small hours of the morning, drinking, eating hamburgers — which, with the arrival of American forces, seem to have replaced roast beef as the national English dish in London. In the morning there was a note left at the hall porter's desk of the hotel that was like a treaty of friendship. "Thanks. A swell party."

In due course E. went back to Canada. I do not know how many operational trips E. did. I remember two stiff daylights on Brest, of which, in description, he did not offer a word.

I remember the dirty afternoon he went out to look for the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau* as they came up-Channel, and how the cloud was very bad and he did not see them at all. I do not think that he had any front-page adventures.

But he survives; he is the type to survive; and back in Canada he will, I hope, recall an Englishman who tried to understand the Canadian way of life.

As for him — I contrasted him very often with English public-school pilots, who, for all their courage, apparently never read anything disturbing — he was a better advertisement for Canada than all the propaganda.

Above all, I could not forget that, self-effacing, non-belligerent type that he was, he had come 6,000 miles to fight. I felt honored that Moose Jaw wanted England to survive. All I can hope is that he now feels that there are some at least in England who feel the same for Moose Jaw.

Friendship must have a machinery. If I cannot correspond with you, if I cannot learn your mind, if I cannot co-operate with you, I cannot be your friend, and if the world is to remain a body of friends it must have the means of friendship, the means of constant friendly intercourse, the means of constant watchfulness over the common interest. . . . I never thought that I had a big difference with a man that I did not find when I came into conference with him that, after all, it was rather a little difference and that if we were frank with one another, and did not too much stand upon that great enemy of mankind which is called pride, we could come together. It is the wish to come together that is more than half of the process.

— Woodrow Wilson, December 30, 1918