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H. E. Bates



Author since the age of 20

Born as Lucy Elizabeth Lucas in the year 1878, elder daughter of a shoemaker of exceptional character and craftsmanship, whose only schooling had been given him at a Dame School somewhere about the time of the Crimean War – a school at which he learned to read tolerably well, but not to write at all – my mother is now in her 91st year.

Not merely alive but lively; possessed of all her faculties, both physical and mental; keenly interested in domestic and world affairs; avid reader of newspapers and watcher of



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the television box; still living in the largish house built by my paternal grandfather at the turn of the century; still able to stitch and sew beautifully, to do her own cooking, housework and shopping.

Devoted to visiting, coach-outings, churchgoing, longish walks and what my father and grandfather would

have called "shop-window fuddling"; highly critical of what she deems to be the deplorable decline of manners and language, and especially of the sponging indolence rife under the contemporary umbrella of the Welfare State; forthright in opinion, reserving the higher of her scorn for political tricksters typified, as she sees it, by Harold Wilson and the very highest of her contempt for "politicaesses", of whom, in her opinion, Barbara Castle is the prime example, who appear to have computers instead of hearts and acid instead of blood in their veins. "Can't do with her. She makes my blood boil."

One of the Old School: that, I suppose, is the readiest and commonest description of her and her kind. When I read of men tottering into fumbling retirement at the age of 60, so often to moulder away through what should be the riper years of male maturity, afflicted with the grey blight of pensionitis, I like to think of my mother, 30 years their senior, entirely unpensioned because she happens to be a victim, by reason of her age group, of that iniquitous and infamous gap in the cradle-to-grave graph of the Welfare State, staunchly holding to her non-generarian independence and still extracting interest and pleasure and amusement from living.

Perhaps her generation is still better exemplified by a friend of hers, even further advanced into her 90s, who when asked/continued on page 54

an unnecessary function. Were it a master chef in full regalia, lightly drunk, with a sympathetic glow of garlic about his person, I, too, might dig deep for silver. But there is nothing

Frazer-Nash who preferred a chair without arms to those we normally sat people in. Each day he would arrive and the waiter bearing his arm-less chair would fractionally beat him to the

heating/assembly job requires no more than a couple of minutes' absence from the table – a pause that is amply rewarded by the triumphant illuminating return.

*Methodism claimed
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Sunday morning*

continued from page 50 by my mother if there was anything she needed by way of extra comfort in life, replied after singularly brief thought: "Yes: three things. A new pair of specs, a new set of teeth and - a man."

My mother was born, like my grandfather and my wife, in the pleasant little stone Northamptonshire shoe-making borough of Higham Ferrers, whose most notable sons are Henry Chichele, Henry V's famous Archbishop at the time of Agincourt, and William Rudd, Charles I's chief engineer during the Civil War.

When she was born the town was probably almost as fast asleep as when Chichele instigated the building of the charming little grammar school in the Perpendicular Style nearly 600 years ago, or when Viscount Byng, of the celebrated Torrington diaries, stayed a night at the local *Green Dragon* in 1796 and paid 3d for his brandy after an intolerably boring sermon at the church, whose fine west door is almost worthy of a cathedral.

She began work at the age of ten, thus doing a little better than her father, who had begun at six, scaring crows. Her starting wage was two shillings a week. This doesn't sound so bad when you remember that it was for half-time. My father was similarly a half-timer: school in the morning, work in the afternoons, or *vis versa*. I am never sure which. For this splendid sum, anyway, my mother tied knots in a shoe factory, later rising to a position, like her father the shoe-maker, where she worked only on special orders demanding exceptional skill.

Northamptonshire, like its neighbouring counties, has long been a stronghold of Nonconformism and at the earliest possible age she was dedicated, as I was later to be, to the cold and unemitting altar of Methodism, my grandfather being contemptuously of the opinion that the Church of England was composed of nothing but a psalm-chanting gang of Papists. Methodism, she was telling me only recently, claimed her at half-past six every Sunday morning before breakfast; she had a good mile to walk to Sunday School. The disciples of Wesley, in those days, had no use for idle hands. Prayer and parsons and all the rest of the frigid paraphernalia of Wesleyanism kept her, as Chaucer says, "narwe in cage", until the last session of Sunday School began at 5.30.

Not only Nonconformism but Liberalism greatly helped to shape her. On each side of the fireplace in my grandfather's front, parlour hung portraits of John Bright and William

Ewart Gladstone: the revered twin gods of Victorian Liberals. And a Liberal she has remained all her life, scorning the soppy humbug that surrounds so much of Socialism and the flabbiness of character among some modern youth that, in her view, so largely stems from it.

She is not one to show emotion easily, though this by no means indicates that she is incapable of feeling it. Her capacity for self-reliance has given her a quite extraordinary aptitude for sitting still; she can embalm herself for hours in an aura of peace but at the same time is ever ready to put on her best hat and gad out for a while, either on some shopping expedition or "just for the ride".

One of her characteristics that has perhaps diminished least with age is her derision of humbug in all its forms. She scorns vanity, arrogance, fuss, self-pity, ostentation, palaver, showing off, high-falutin speech and, above all, snobbery, whether of rich or poor. She can detect it all from a mile off and this, I am glad to say, forms a good part of my inheritance from her.

Physically, she is cast in that pure Anglo-Saxon mould which has made and still makes the people of the English Midland valleys the best-looking in England, perhaps in Europe. The girls here are renowned for their good looks and my mother, in the days when girls really dressed like girls and looked like flowers, was one of them.

I see all the special features of that fine Anglo-Saxon type not only in her but also in my wife, my daughters and my grand-daughters: the delicate bones, the fine, soft skin, the blue eyes, the fair, light-textured hair. Age may wither, but time cannot alter the bone structure of a face; and at 90 my mother displays a profile beautifully clean in line, handsome and almost uncrinkled, so that she really looks some 20 years younger than she really is. Many an American woman half her age would envy her complexion.

Does she carry a cross about with her because she once worked for two shillings a week or that she was once so poor, in her early married life, that she was left, one Friday morning, with only sixpence in her purse? Not, as they say nowadays, on your nelly. Quite undaunted, she took this same sixpence across the road to the butcher's shop, bought three-pennyworth of steak, two-pennyworth of kidney and a pennyworth of suet, and gave my father a good steak-and-kidney pudding for his midday dinner.

Today the statisticians would put her last remaining sixpence fifty fathoms deep below the poverty line. But statisticians have no code index for pride and it so happens that the word "poverty" is not, and never was, in her language. Perhaps she remembered that her own mother had once sat up half the night, by candle-light or even by a rushlight, and made shirts at sixpence a time; and perhaps it comforted her.