

# BOOKS AND THINGS

By LEWIS GANNETT

SOMETHING happened in the port engine; the plane swerved and dived. The pilot reacted instinctively; he pulled the ship back to level, but, as he listened to the engines, he knew, this is it. He didn't know whether it was occupied or unoccupied France beneath him; and he did not know much about France in war time. H. E. Bates's "Fair Stood the Wind for France" (Little, Brown, \$2.50) is the story of Pilot John Franklin's discoveries.

## "One Failed to Return"

It is impossible, with the headlines fresh in mind—"Milan pounded; Mannheim blitzed. . . . Ten planes (or six planes, or forty, or one) failed to return"—to read such a book as this as one would read a novel in peace time. Maybe Françoise, the girl in this story, is a little, too, impossibly calm in faith and pure in heart. Mr. Bates announces that two of the four sergeants in the crew of that Wellington were "the new, high-spirited types, to whom flying was more important than war"; and then utterly fails to develop the meaning of that new type. The boys fade out of the book, as flyers must fade quickly out of the memory even of their comrades at mess. That isn't, technically, good novel writing. What Mr. Bates does is simply to plunge his reader into the tension which must be the every-minute life of the British—or American—flyer down in France, and to hold you, still, tense and uncertain, to the last page.

Franklin's arm was savagely torn in the skewed landing, but he was the commander. For a few days his crew still held the profound interdependence of a flying crew in the air. Then they found haven with a French family, and became individuals again. The two young men, still young enough to be fearless in devotion to the dangerous moment, soon went their way. For a time Franklin, emerging from his fever, found himself relying on O'Connor, an ageless, lumpy man of the pre-war air, "tough and common and warm as a brick," one of the imperishable English types who somehow blunder through; and then he discovered that Françoise was the center of his world and of his faith.

## France—Still France

It was a risk for Françoise's family to shelter the Englishmen. Franklin politely assured them that he knew this. "In France everything is a risk now," the old man replied. "That is the way of it." Françoise's grandmother did not talk, but Franklin trusted her. Françoise explained that the old woman had lived through three wars; she knew what to do. "You have great trust in her," said the Englishman. "No," said the French girl, "I have great trust in God." Franklin did not think in quite those terms, but he discovered that it is easier to speak of courage in French than in English. Franklin saw that family as "three generations of one nation, part of a defenseless people . . . little people who had lain on the ground and had their faces trampled on but whose power was still unbroken. He knew it clearly now as a more wonderful, more enduring and more inspiring power than he had ever believed possible: the power of their own hearts." O'Connor continued to distrust all "frogs."

## Intensity

Death seemed somehow more terrible in that little community than it had seemed in England, at the station, where the faces in the mess were so often changing and death sometimes did not seem to matter at all, to be merely a form of absence. When the doctor was shot as a hostage, Franklin raged. The shooting of men as ransom, against a wall, was different. "You forget that he knew what he was doing," said the doctor's brother. Franklin, forced to think about his own arm, became more conscious of death than he had ever been when the searchlights held him pinned amidst the flak. He had learned to break life into endurable fragmentary seconds; now it became a continuity.

Mr. Bates is a forty-year-old English novelist who has lived three years with the R. A. F. He reveals here again that intense instinct for catching the emotion of a countryside, that sensitivity for the moment in a man's life, which has given his short stories distinction. There is no politics of the underground here, and, if there is melodrama, it is not the kind which seems translated from film. Reading his story, you feel that you are sharing something of the intensity of moment usually beyond civilian comprehension.



H. E. Bates