

# Books of the Times

By ORVILLE PRESCOTT

**A** AMERICAN and British airmen have crashed or parachuted to earth within the walls of festung Europa in large numbers. A considerable number have escaped, aided by the underground, walking by night, armed with false papers obtained by mysterious means. Their adventures have been romantic, exciting, hair-raising and desperate. Few details have as yet

been allowed to be published as to how such escapes are actually made. But their hold on the popular imagination has been stimulated by a succession of novels and movies. The latest such novel is "Fair Stood the Wind for France,"\* by H. E. Bates, a co-selection for June of the Book-of-the-Month Club.

Mr. Bates is the English writer who was commissioned "Flying Officer X" by the RAF Bomber Command so that he could



H. E. Bates

acquire information at first hand about the crews of the British bombers. He is a competent, professional story-teller. But this book is so uneven, so confused and obscure in purpose, that it falls sadly flat. It is unworthy of Mr. Bates and unworthy of book club selection, too.

## The Story of a Pilot's Escape

John Franklin, 22 years old, was the pilot and only officer in the five-man crew of a Wellington bomber that crashed somewhere in France after a raid on Italy in the summer of 1942. When the four sergeants, who were his friends as well as his subordinates, pulled him out of the wrecked plane they found that he was the only one to be injured. He had a nasty six-inch gash deep in his upper left arm. The five men walked through fields by night and hid in woods by day until the state of Franklin's arm compelled them to seek help. They found it at a French farmhouse. There they were fed and hid in an old mill. A doctor was summoned. And two of the crew were even started on their devious way to safety. But Franklin's arm grew worse. It had to be amputated. The other two sergeants also departed and

Franklin remained behind, to nurse his wound, to worry about the risk his presence meant to his kindly hosts and to fall in love with Françoise, the farmer's daughter.

How Franklin and Françoise, too, for love bloomed quickly in that tense atmosphere of suspense and fear, finally made their escape to Spain and a wedding after several sensational coincidences completes Mr. Bates' story. It is an adequate reworking of the well-worn formula of hero and heroine escaping from the wicked Nazis by the skin of their teeth and much good luck. But it is irritating and disappointing because it should be more than that. Mr. Bates has a quality to his prose that promises much and then does not fulfill that promise. There is a crisp, smooth flow to his style that is deft and sure. But Mr. Bates is much better at describing the natural world and the general atmosphere of proud resistance and jittery fear than he is at creating well-rounded characters or than he is at working out an exciting and logical plot.

## Many Passages of Beauty

John Franklin is hardly an individual person at all. He seems only a silhouette. The sharp outline indicates youth and flying and the terrible strain of many missions completed against the enemy at the risk and probability of his death. But the rest of his portrait is a blank, save for bravery and vaguely good intentions. Françoise is brave, too, loving and resourceful. But what is really indicated about her can be summed up in the phrase, heroine and love interest who aids hero to escape and accompanies him. The other characters, the four sergeants and several members of Françoise's family, are only so many names.

"Fair Stood the Wind for France" is a book that fails because of its lack of direction and purpose. It seems to drift along aimlessly. If Mr. Bates intended to write a story of action and excitement, then he did not include enough of either. If he intended to write of the thoughts, fears and emotions of a pilot who loses his arm, falls in love and flees the Nazis so as to make them real and sympathetic, then he has not succeeded in that either. But there are so many passages of skill and even beauty in this book that it would be unjust to dismiss it too brusquely. These deal with the woods and fields by night, the calm beauty of a sunlit river with a girl fishing under the watchful gaze of a Nazi sentry, the suffering and hatred that lie like a curse on France and will continue to do so long after the last Nazi on French soil has been killed or driven back to his own wretched land.

\*FAIR STOOD THE WIND FOR FRANCE. By H. E. Bates. 270 pages. Atlantic: Little, Brown. \$2.50.