



"Lovers Sheltering From a Storm."

Douglas P. Bliss.

## In the Backwash of War

DEAR LIFE. By H. E. Bates. 149 pp.  
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By JAMES STERN

**B**ETWEEN the wars story after story, novel after novel, used to appear in England from the pen of H. E. Bates. By 1939, when only 34, he had published more first-rate works of fiction than many a writer twice his age. Like the tales of A. E. Coppard (to whom Mr. Bates is undoubtedly indebted), almost all of these short stories and novels were concerned with life in the country, with families on farms, the conflicts between youth and age in quiet, pastoral places. Written in effortless, exquisite prose, pervaded with the smell of wild flowers, of dung and the stable, with the soft sounds of animals grazing, the books of Mr. Bates evoked the tranquillity, the timelessness of a Constable landscape.

From the war — not unnaturally, perhaps—a totally different H. E. Bates has emerged. Instead of the sun shining serenely over English meadows, of rain dripping from bare wintry branches, a cold sinister wind now blows down the bleak streets of a small English town that had been badly bombed in the war. There is no character in "Dear Life" to whom the war has not done either glaring or hidden damage.

The bomb that blew up the home had also killed the gentle father of 18-year-old Laura. It had permanently wrecked her mother's nerves and it had literally struck dumb her Uncle Cupid, who had done nothing since but (following the advice of a doctor) knit all day for dear life in scarlet wool. It had also driven Laura's neurotic mother to marry the awful Oakley, whose fat repulsive body and "hairy, dog-skinned neck" constantly "stood before Laura like part of a contemptuous ghoul."

The war, too, was responsible for forcing all four of these nerve-racked people to live together in the basement of the derelict house, and for finally driving Laura to seek escape from its terrible atmosphere in the streets. One night in a dark, empty, hostile street, with the

wind howling "into the glasses of the street lamps, rattling the white-green mantles," Laura is accosted by a Canadian ex-sailor called Clay. From this moment Laura and the reader, she like a somnambulist, he hypnotized by horror, are carried helplessly, relentlessly through scenes vibrating with that quiet, nightmarish atmosphere of terror which, in this reviewer's opinion, only one other living novelist, Faulkner, knows how to describe.

Once more the war was responsible for what Laura learned too late: that Clay is a fearless murderer, a man of irredeemable depravity. To give some idea of the violence of "Dear Life," Mr. Bates allows Clay ten pages in which to batter the obese Oakley to pulp with his bare fists. At the climax of this ghastly scene Laura, "unprepared for the casualness of the thing, the way the life of a man was cheaply held," asks: "You don't think you hit him too much?" To which Clay calmly replies: "Just an ordinary slap or two. The kind we dished out in Italy and Crete. \* \* \*"

**O**AKLEY'S murder is not the last the helpless Laura watches Clay commit. After an automobile hold-up carried out by him almost in silence, a couple of old ladies—in a toy-shop scene too reminiscent, perhaps, of the Grand Guignol—fall shrieking, "like curiously punctured balloons," to the conscienceless Canadian's gun. That night Laura and Clay sleep in a field. In the morning, finding herself abandoned by Clay, she makes her way to a bombed tower. There she hears a sound "like a muffled inexorable shuffling of advancing feet \* \* \* closing in, steadily encircling her." Laura is convinced she is trapped, until she realizes that the sound she heard was that of "the soft crunching murmur of cows grazing beyond the apple trees."

Irish-born novelist and short-story writer, Mr. Stern is the author of "Hidden Damage," a study of Germany at the end of World War II.