THE WRITER EXPLAINS

I HAVE selected these thirty stories from five volumes of my published work: *Day's End* (1928), *The Black Boxer* (1932), *The Woman Who Had Imagination* (1934), *Cut and Come Again* (1935), and *Something Short and Sweet* (1937). They represent something like a quarter of my output in short story form over the past ten years. Except in the ordinary way of proof reading I have not revised them at all. I have done this not through laziness, but deliberately, and for a reason: because I feel that once a story is written, printed and published it should have reached, in a sense, a state of finality. The author should then resist impulses to tamper with it, to superimpose on it the touches of a maturer experience and technique. Painters do not, as far as I know, visit the galleries in which their pictures are hung and retouch them there; nor do sculptors hack at their monuments after they have been erected in public places. What is true of them should be also true, I feel, of authors. The finished work of an artist, in a sense, no longer belongs to him.

I first began writing short stories, with any pretence of seriousness, when I was nineteen. I was then working eight hours a day in a warehouse. From that time until I was twenty-three I must have written between thirty and forty stories, of which twenty-five made up the volume *Day's End*. From these stories I got the reputation of being rather a delicate writer with a carefully polished style — which was a mistake. My style was not polished and I wrote with what Edward Garnett once called a 'facile devil inside you'. Stories like 'Fear', 'Fishing', 'Blossoms', 'The Idiot' and 'Harvest', none of which are included here, were written easily, quickly and light-heartedly, often between breakfast and lunch. Later stories, such as 'The Gleaner', 'Time', 'Little Fish', 'Harvest Moon' and 'Italian Haircut', which are included here, were written in the same way, quickly and happily, but with a difference. In the first stories I was groping my way towards becoming a conscious writer; in

the later stories I had become one. Again, in the early stories, and stories like them, I showed a dangerous appetite for sucking the significance out of trivialities — dangerous because it came to me so easily and naturally that it threatened to become a habit. This eager interest in trivialities, though it was precisely what made me a short story writer, threatened about the time of *Day's End* to make me a writer of very limited scope. I became aware of this, my mind going back to the warning given by Edward Garnett in the preface to my first novel — 'there is the path of art endlessly difficult' and I saw that I had the choice either of repeating myself in a series of charming episodes which I could produce as easily as breathing or of consciously trying to widen my range of sympathy and develop myself. This process of development from the dreamy world of the subjective, seen in such stories as 'The Birthday' and 'Two Candles', in which mood was more important than character, to a wider, harder, more objective world in which character was of greater importance, was very difficult for me. It was a transition accomplished primarily by two stories, 'Charlotte Esmond' and 'The Black Boxer'. Both of these stories, drawn directly from life and not from imagination, were not written by the facile devil inside me; they were hard work; but they were both, in a sense, a triumph. They marked the end of a struggle; they projected me, confidently, into a new world. Without having written them I probably could not have written 'The Mill', 'The Station', 'The Kimono' or 'I Am Not Myself', which I reckon as being among the first half-dozen of my stories to date.

'The Kimono' brings up another question. I have never from the first had the slightest interest in plots, and no one who reads these thirty stories will need to be told that the idea of plots is something completely foreign to my whole conception of the short story. Not only do I doubt whether I could evolve a formula for writing a short story to save my life, but I have never in my life written a story even to illustrate an idea. But there was an occasion when I was invited to write a story round an idea, and the result, astonishing though it may seem, is 'The Kimono'. This story

is one of a dozen others, all similarly commissioned and all written round the same idea. The only difference between 'The Kimono' and the rest of the stories, all contained in one volume, is that 'The Kimono' is not written round the idea but in defiance of the idea. It is a straightforward story in which character and atmosphere are predominant and the idea almost completely subservient. The characters, as living characters should, have swallowed up the plot. 'The Kimono', in fact, written out of genuine and not artificial impulses, was intended to be a story that could stand by its own strength. One result of this, at least, was interesting. When 'The Kimono' and its companion stories later came to be serialized in a Sunday newspaper 'The Kimono' was banned. This brings me to another and more important point. As I write this preface it seems to me that the short story, which I regard as being not by any means the least of this generation's contribution to literature, stands a fair chance, as near as matters, of being starved out of existence. In England, at the moment, there is not one reputable magazine devoted entirely to the short story, and the periodicals which take any interest in it at all can be numbered on the fingers of one hand. And outside of one or two periodicals the rates paid for short stories are pitiful. There is no magazine in this country to compare, for standards of taste and remuneration, with *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harpers*, *Scribners*, or *Esquire* in America. Here in England, by a nice irony, it is the newspapers which have saved the short story from complete oblivion and many short story writers from starvation. I say by a nice irony deliberately, for though newspapers have the lowest possible standards of taste regarding rape, homosexuality, murder, perversion, cruelty, suicide, divorce, public indecency and sexual behaviour in general so long as such things are related in terms of fact, they have the severest and most impeccable standards of taste when these same things are related in terms of fiction. Don't ask me why. I treasure greatly a letter of refusal from the editor of a leading newspaper: 'Sorry. Don't you know that Mrs. Grundy is co-editor of every English newspaper?' Nor is this true exclusively of newspapers. I could name half

a dozen English magazines where Mrs. Grundy appears to have a seat on the editorial board.

The existence of the short story seems to depend largely therefore on its survival in volume form: in anthologies and in volumes such as this. That it is the most fascinating of all prose forms I myself have never had any doubt. Its lack of appeal to a wide public completely defeats me. Its flexibility, almost unlimited range of subject and sympathy, and its very brevity, make it as perfectly suited to the expression and mood of this age as the heroic couplet was to the age of Pope. To my mind it is in every way a finer means of expression of our age of unrest, disbelief and distrust than either the novel or poetry. For that reason alone, in spite of petticoat editors and a prejudiced public, I have no doubt as to its future. As we know it, it is still an art in its infancy.

Of my own stories there is nothing to say in explanation for the simple reason that I hope, and think, they do not need explanation. Those who are interested will be able, from these thirty stories, to see quite plainly what forces have influenced me. They can work out, if they so care, the stages of my development, from 'The Easter Blessing' to 'The Mill'. But they are not asked to do that. They are similarly not asked to accept a philosophy, a point of view, a creed, a moral, a sermon on good or evil. The best I can hope is that they will read these stories with something of the spirit in which they were written: for pleasure, and out of a passionate interest in human lives.

H. E. BATES