

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1948

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

LONG NOVELETTE

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NOVELETTE

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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The Hidden Talent of Artist Bates

BY SNOWDEN T. HERRICK

WHEN Mr. John Haslet Bates was 20 and a student at the New York Art Student's League, he dreamed of Monet, Manet and Millet, and *la vie de*

Boheme de Greenwich Village. At the age of 33 he had achieved a wife, three kids, the left half of a two-family house in semi-suburban Queens Village, and a career with

After all, doesn't an artist dabble in a kind of sorcery?



Waxman, Flaxman, Carmichael and Oglethorpe, Inc., an advertising agency specializing in menswear, womenswear, sportswear and infantswear.

THE particular task of artist Bates was to add to sketches drawn by other artists of men, women and children clad in garments of varying degrees of intimacy appropriate backgrounds. For instance, the man at the next desk in the W. F. C. & O. art department would draw a picture of a luscious damsel clad in a Beautiform Foundation ("builds you up without a letdown"). Bates would create around this gorgeous item a Chippendale boudoir and a feeling of frustration.

Because Bates' soul still harbored an ambition: to draw the figures as well as the backgrounds. Unfortunately, in common with many artists, Bates was unable to draw a human being that looked like anything but a self-portrait. What's more, he was always the only one who couldn't see the resemblance. Since he was personally distinguished by an Adam's apple that protruded beyond his chin, his involuntary self-portraits were scarcely of commercial value. In landscapes he was the Cézanne of the ad world; in figures he should have stuck to finger painting.

The man who was aware of this crippling weakness in Bates' artistic armory was thereby responsible in Bates' mind for dooming the poor draftsman to a life of inanimate objects, and he hated him with a hatred as intense as his Adam's apple was prominent. The target of this consuming feeling was his art director, Mr. Clifton Oglethorpe, vice-president of W. F. C. & O. in charge of the art department. Oglethorpe was a man who wore sincere neckties until the publication of "The Hucksters" sent sincere neckties out of fashion in the advertising business. He was as unaware that the drab little artist hated him as he was convinced that "Advertising Is the Life Blood of the American Way of Life."

The great day of John Bates came in the summer of 1948—but he did not realize it at the time. New Yorkers remember it well, because that was the day the tower fell off the Empire State Building. An unsuspected structural fault, the investigators

said, weakened by the incessant swaying of the world's tallest building.

On that day Bates was handed a picture of two implausibly handsome men wearing Heart o' Hollywood LEEsue jackets. His job was to place them in a New York skyline setting, to indicate, perhaps, the coast-to-coast stylishness of the jackets. He quickly penciled in the skyline, with windows suggested here and there, and sent it on its way through the channels of W. F. C. & O.

In about 30 minutes Clifton Oglethorpe bounded out of his office, furnished with blond-wood desk, bar and bookcase, and lined with proofs of prize-winning ads. Carrying the skyline and jacket drawing between his fingers, he fluttered it in front of Bates' Adam's apple.

"For God's sake," he snapped. "Are you blind, Bates?"

"Yessir," said Bates, out of habit.

"Can't you see that this space is reserved for the copy? We've got enough trouble trying to fit in the trade mark, the slogan, the store name, the firm name, the fabric name, the address and the price without your sticking the Empire State Building up there."

"Yessir," said Bates.

"Dammit all, you fix that right up. We've got to get it approved in fifteen minutes."

"Yessir," said Bates.

The artist bared his teeth at the receding figure of the art director, picked up his art gum eraser, and savagely erased the tower of the Empire State Building. At that precise instant, the great collapse occurred which was to leave the Chrysler building without peer.

Bates, working in an office in the East Fifties, didn't learn about the disaster on 34th Street until he was reading his evening paper on the subway to Queens. By then it was too late to put two and two together.

A FEW days later a similar incident took place. Bates was, as usual, doing a background job, this time in Radio City. The ad would show a group of youngsters wearing Kiddiekins Snosuits peering over the edge of the sunken plaza at the foot of the RCA Building. Bates was sketching the sprawling statue of Prometheus surrounded by the

circle of the zodiac (or escaping the wedding ring, as local mythology has it).

In drawing the gilded Titan he was having trouble with the rock upon which Prometheus is precariously balanced. Reflecting that this was probably the closest he would ever get to drawing a figure, he rubbed out the rock. The famous Greek promptly dove into the fountain.

Bates was happy to be present at this interesting event, but he still didn't catch on. The great revelation of his hidden talent was scheduled for that very night, when he was working late and alone at the office.

Bent over his sloping drawing board, Bates was afflicted simultaneously by the stifling darkness of the night, by his secret yearning and by his hatred of Oglethorpe. His model was an elaborately embroidered peacock tapestry draped on an easel. Before him was a sheet of paper bearing a menswear masterpièce Bates had had no part in—a picture of a pipe-smoking, supercilious young man wearing a gaudy necktie. Forming a border around the ad-to-be were many more gaudy ties ("Tw-w-w-ist them, pul-l-l them, thr-r-r-ow them in the furnace"). Roughed-out lettering said: "Be a peacock . . . attract the female of the species," followed by an idiot row of exclamation points.

It was up to Bates to copy laboriously the peacock in the white space reserved for it alongside the young man. He found it very discouraging. He didn't like working late, anyway, because it interfered with his efforts to keep the left side of his two-family garden more productive than the rival right side. Furthermore, he considered it rank injustice for Oglethorpe to put a landscape man to work on a silly fowl when the art staff included a perfectly good bird, beast and baby man. Finally; the drawing wasn't going well at all. The tail was way out of proportion.

With a quick, peevish swipe, he drew his art gum across the offending tail feathers. As he did so, he heard a tearing noise. It wasn't the paper, thank God, and then he looked up at the embroidered peacock and trembled. Matching perfectly the erasure mark was a rip through the peacock's tail. Bates nervously dropped the art gum and sat back in his chair. He stared at the mutilated cloth and at his drawing. He fumbled

with his pencil. He picked up the rubber square and looked at it. He very lightly brushed the peacock's head on the paper. The embroidered head dimmed. He rubbed harder. A hole appeared in the cloth. He stopped to think.

In his not especially perceptive mind, John Haslett Bates lined up the peacock and the diving statue. Then he reached back and added the Empire State incident. There was no getting away from it: this nonentity of an advertising artist, slave to a huckster, was not as other men. With a flick of his wrist he could literally erase buildings.

OTHER men might have had other thoughts, but Bates' first reaction on discovering his new talent was not an exalted one: how was he to explain the damage to the peacock? An idea came. He hastily completed his drawing, hoping it would be acceptable. Then, on another piece of paper, he copied the peacock and the cloth it was on, faithfully imitating every fold. With the eraser he obliterated the drawing of the fabric. When he was through the easel was bare. As he swept up the dust, he thought, "they can ask me where it is. The last I saw of it was tonight, when I went home."

For the sake of his explanation he went down the elevator empty-handed. On the ride home he paid little attention to his paper (which carried a picture of Prometheus on his belly) and on his arrival he neglected children, wife and garden. His wife remarked that he was working too hard. He laughed, the first time he had ever laughed at that suggestion.

The laughter continued, in secret, and in secret the mousy Bates became a practical joker. On the subway in the morning a woman's hat with three pomegranates and two pheasant's feathers tickled his nose. He sketched it on the margin of his paper, erased it, and it crumbled around her ears—to her consternation and loud cries.

One evening his neighbor made an unfortunate comparison of the two gardens. From behind a curtain Bates drew and erased the neighbor's highest hollyhocks and biggest roses. He derived considerable satisfaction from the determined war on Japanese beetles which followed.

But this was petty stuff for Bates. He

wanted to draw figures and he wanted retaliation for the indignities he had suffered from Oglethorpe. And then one day he had his answer.

He would draw two pictures. One would be a fashion drawing for the new College-Tex Fruit of the Lamb Clothing account ("climb out of that barrel and get into a College-Tex—the *Class* of the Year"). This he would present to Oglethorpe to prove his ability. The concept of the other picture was a triumph of the Batesian imagination. This drawing would be a carefully done portrait of Clifton Oglethorpe himself—complete to the cutaway collar and sunlamp tan. If Oglethorpe should reject his request for advancement, woe to Oglethorpe. An eraser operation on his picture would be much more enjoyable than sticking pins in a wax image.

BATES worked late all week on his project and both drawings were finished by Monday morning. The clothing drawing looked very handsome to him; considering the subject, he couldn't say the same for the Oglethorpe portrait. Clearing his throat and adjusting his tie, he picked up the fashion art and went in to see the vice president in charge of the art department.

"Mr. Oglethorpe," he began.

"Yes," said Oglethorpe.

"Mr. Oglethorpe, I'd like you to look at this picture for the College-Tex account. I'm sure I can do figures now, and I wish you would give me another chance to draw something besides backgrounds."

Oglethorpe took the picture, examined it, and smirked.

"Bates, you've still got your old trouble. Look at that Adam's apple; a customer for College-Tex Fruit of the Lamb doesn't want to think he looks like *that*. Until you can stop drawing pictures of yourself, you'd better stick to furniture and landscapes."

Bates felt the top of his head grow warm, and with a mouse's fury he scampered out of the office. He sat down at his desk and mumbled, "I'll show him, I'll show him."

He picked up the drawing of Oglethorpe and said to himself: "Doesn't like Adam's apples, eh? I'll fix *his* Adam's apple."

Fiercely he drew his eraser across Oglethorpe's penciled throat—and slumped over his drawing board, the blood streaming from his own neck. He hadn't been able to draw anyone but himself. His portrait of the art director looked exactly like John Haslett Bates.
