

Elizabeth's Finest Hours

A MOMENT IN TIME. By H. E. Bates. 248 pp. New York: Farrar, Straus & Co. \$4.50.

By AILEEN PIPPETT

IT was an exceptionally cold winter in England in 1940. The ornamental lake in the Waterhouse grounds froze until the swans broke a hole and kept it open, as Elizabeth noticed from the drawing room window. She wanted more toast for tea—but the last crumbs had been fed to the birds, and the baker couldn't deliver bread until the snow plough, under repair, cleared the drive. So she happily made do with birthday cake and felt obscurely that this was a memorable moment.

This opening scene, sharply registered and hauntingly evocative, reveals hidden meanings as the story proceeds. Nineteen forty was the year of the Battle of Britain. H. E. Bates is dealing with no small matter of temporary inconvenience to a rich family; this was a national

crisis in which he took his fighting part, and he chooses to describe it through the eyes of an upper class girl of 19.

At first the war means little to her. The big house is requisitioned at short notice by the R.A.F. Living with grim Grandmother and bumbling Uncle Harry in the bailiff's cottage, with only one servant instead of six, is fun. So is the companionship of the reckless, flippant young pilots, learning their queer new language. Dunkirk is no more than a dark cloud over the French coast as the retreating army burns its ammunition dumps. There are feasts, dances, swimming in the lake. Of course the swans can be dangerous when disturbed. And the British, shut in their island as the birds had been in the ice, are fighting to keep their freedom to live as they please.

Gradually the reality becomes clear to Elizabeth. She marries a young pilot, observes his exhaustion as the pace quickens, the losses increase. She has to live with the knowledge that each flight may be his last, but

one does not talk about it, there is work to be done in the fruit orchards of Kent, the anxiety of other wives and sweethearts to be shared. There will be a harvest; there will be victory. In the meantime one must not be a "gloomie" though Tom and Dick and Harry have in turn "bought it" or "gone for a Burton." Death is not to be mentioned; defeat is out of the question.

Mr. Bates, writing here at the top of his form, has caught the spirit of those desperate days and rendered it in scenes that are both tender and magnificent. He does not go in for heroics. There are no set speeches, only the swift slang of the time, the personal anger of the young men fighting mad to "tear a strip off" Goering and his crew, the background of the beloved English countryside to be protected at all costs from the horror screaming through the sky above its quiet fields. This is a tribute to courage, a heartening reminder of a time not to be forgotten.

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