

THE AUTHOR



Photo: Mark Gerson.

THE DARLING BUDS OF MAY is a startling book. "Here," as its American publishers say, "is H. E. Bates, master story-teller and novelist, in a new and Rabelaisian mood. *The Darling Buds of May* chronicles the adventures of the incredible Larkin family — surely one of the raciest families it has ever been your good fortune to meet. Lusty, devil-may-care, drunk with the fullness of life, they are the new rich of England; fruit pickers and junk dealers." And that is a very fair summary. As the book has not yet been published etiquette forbids me to review it, but perhaps I can say that it presents a flaunting challenge to austerity and middle-mindedness and that its effect is of a voluptuous, Bacchic binge as pagan as May itself.

H. E. Bates has never been a stereotyped writer and has deliberately experimented in a variety of forms. "I like writing different things," he says. "And I think it's a good thing for a writer. It sets a challenge — there's a great temptation to choose the things you know you can bring off." On the other hand, his writing previously, except for the "Uncle Silas" stories, has tended towards the sombre and sensuous. *The Darling Buds of May* is not in the least sombre and could be called sensual. It was written in a month ("the sort of thing you have to write quickly before the bubble explodes"), but its effect on the author has lasted longer.

"I haven't really recovered from it yet. I'm seeing everything through Pa Larkin's eyes still. And I feel I want to go slow and think things out a bit more. It may be the beginning of a new phase."

"How did it begin? Do you find it difficult to get ideas for plots?"

"There are always ideas around. It's the second idea that counts. You get one which may take you along for a bit and then seems sterile — that's why so many young writers get stuck. And then you may get another idea which seems to have nothing to do with the first. Then one bright morning you wake up and the two have fused together. It's like two halves, or negative and positive. I've said it before, I'm afraid. It's a hobby-horse of mine."

"I'd been feeling very dissatisfied with

what I'd been doing and I had a feeling I ought to branch out and experiment a bit. I'd even thought of not writing any novels for five years and just sticking to short stories. At any rate, there was this junk-yard paradise; it's not in this village but nearby. They had everything you could think of piled up there — bedsteads, old iron, oil-drums, everything. And a few yards away it was beautiful — flowers, trees, fields. Very fascinating and I'd thought I'd like to write about it. But what do you say? That it's untidy and rather dirty? Not very exciting. So there it stopped. Then quite fortuitously — and in a completely different village — I saw a truck drive up outside a sweetshop. And out they all came — fat old Mum, Pa Larkin and all the children. That was all — the second idea, you see. The rest was all imagination."

H. E. Bates began writing stories when he was fourteen and never had much doubt that writing would be his career, although there was little precedent for it in his family. He was born in Northamptonshire and his first job was on a newspaper. Then he became a clerk in a leather warehouse and at the age of seventeen, secretly and excitedly, in his spare time and in his employer's, he wrote his first novel — *The Two Sisters*. This was rewritten at nineteen and published, just before his twentieth birthday.

Since then he has lived by writing — not always easily, but he says: "I get very impatient with the people who say they can't make out with writing full time and have to do something else as well. I just think they don't want to do it enough. You can if you really want to. For the first two or three years I was living on about eighty pounds or so. Of course, it meant a bit more then, but I certainly wasn't buying expensive presents for my girl-friends or driving fast cars." He did manage, however, to marry in 1931 and go to the "converted" granary near Ashford, where he and his family still live.

Loose in the R.A.F.

During his early years as a writer, H. E. Bates was much helped and influenced by Edward Garnett. Garnett was a man of importance but also one of perception, and he had no hesitation in giving both friendship and advice generously to the young writer. It is a relationship which H. E. Bates himself describes in an equally generous tribute — *Edward Garnett* (Parrish, 1950). It is a personal portrait which ends: "It is clear that he was that rare person — rare in life but rarer still in literature — whose whole life was in the work of others. And because my work is also my life no man could owe him more."

Until the last war, H. E. Bates' reputation as a writer was critically strong, but his books still sold fairly slowly. When war broke out, however, he was asked to join the R.A.F. — as a writer. It was the first of a few outstandingly imaginative appointments. The R.A.F. put him through an officer's training course, gave him the rank of Squadron-Leader and *carte blanche* to work as he pleased and then let him loose on a bomber station.

"It wasn't very easy at first. In fact after the first few weeks I rang up my boss and said, 'Look here, I'm going to be bankrupt before long because I've been pushing the

The Darling Buds of May
by H. E. BATES

boat out pretty heavily since I came here. It's the only way I can get these chaps to talk at all. But I can't go on like this. Do you think you could squeeze some sort of allowance out of your people there?" Somehow he did and I became probably the only man to have a special expenses allowance for pushing out the boat."

It was justified, however, and as "Flying Officer X" H. E. Bates found a bigger public than he had previously known and it is one he has kept. In 1944 he wrote *Fair Stood The Wind For France* under his own name and this was followed by two more of his best-known novels, *The Purple Plain* and *The Jacaranda Tree*, both of which came from his brief war-time visits to India.

Since the war H. E. Bates has become increasingly well-known and has also managed to maintain the difficult balancing trick of satisfying the popular market and the critical one. He has written novels, essays, short stories and plays. He also writes poetry, but has published very little ("I'm very diffident about poetry and I do much less now than when I was younger. I usually just put it in a drawer and leave it"). He writes, generally speaking, for three or four hours in the morning and is convinced that his output would be just the same eventually even if he did put in some long slogging. Otherwise he spends much of his time gardening and puts this among his main activities apart from writing. It is obviously a very successful one.

Appreciative Good Living

The Darling Buds of May is not the work of a man who is indifferent to the physical pleasures of life and there is evidence of appreciative good living in H. E. Bates's home — in the black-tiled bathroom and comfortably luxurious furnishings, in the original paintings by French impressionists, in the two cars ("so much easier when we're all going to and fro at different times"). Like most authors, and with some reason, H. E. Bates can grumble about the tax man but he can also grumble about prices on the Continent, having just come back from a short Spring holiday there.

Twenty-two years ago, as a very young man, he was being lunched by his publishers in Soho, and a junior partner, noticing his bewilderment, was kindly showing him that the Parmesan cheese was for sprinkling over the minestrone. The other day his fifty-third birthday was celebrated by his publishers with a party at the Caprice. It is not quite rags to riches but near enough to suggest the cynical corollary — a middle-aged author sitting back to enjoy his profits and pepping them up every so often with the same mixture-as-before. But there is another picture, in this case the true one. The writer, professional to the core but still with only the same basic equipment that he first had — pen, paper and an urge to write. A writer who is waiting to "think things out", to explore "a new phase".

THE DARLING BUDS OF MAY will be published on July 14 (Joseph, 12s. 6d.). Other books mentioned above: My Uncle Silas, Cape, 8s. 6d.; Two Sisters, Cape, 10s. 6d.; Stories of Flying Officer X, Cape, 10s. 6d.; Fair Stood The Wind For France, Joseph, 9s. 6d.; Purple Plain, Joseph, 9s. 6d. and Jacaranda Tree, 6s.

BOOKS AND BOOKMEN

Bates's new comic novel has already had the best reception of any of his books in America. Yet in style and flavour, it is essentially English. This opening scene is typical of the whole:

AFTER distributing the eight ice-creams—they were the largest vanilla, chocolate and raspberry super-bumpers, each in yellow, brown and almost purple stripes—Pop Larkin climbed up into the cab of the gentian blue, home-painted thirty hundred-weight truck, laughing happily.

"Perfick wevver! You kids all right at the back there? Ma, hitch up a bit!"

Ma, in her salmon jumper, was almost two yards wide.

"I said you kids all right there?"

"How do you think they can hear," Ma said, "with you revving up all the time?"

Pop laughed again and let the engine idle. The strong May sunlight, the first hot sun of the year, made the bonnet of the truck gleam like brilliant blue enamel. All down the road, winding through the valley, miles of pink apple orchards were in late bloom, showering petals like confetti.

"Zinnia and Petunia, Primrose, Victoria, Montgomery, Mariette!"—Pop unrolled the handsome ribbon of six names but heard only five separate answers, each voice choked and clotted with ice-cream.

"Where's Mariette? Ain't Mariette there?"

"I'm here, Pop."

"That's all right, then. Thought you'd fell overboard."

"No, I'm here, Pop, I'm here."

"Perfick!" Pop said. "You think I ought to get some more ice-creams? It's so hot Ma's is nearly melted."

Ma shook all over, laughing like a jelly. Little rivers of yellow, brown and pinkish-purple cream were running down over her huge lardy hands. In her handsome big black eyes the cloudless blue May sky was reflected, making them dance as she threw out the splendid bank of her bosom, quivering under its salmon jumper. At thirty-five she still had a head of hair like black silk cotton, curly and thick as it fell to her fat olive shoulders. Her stomach and thighs bulged like a hop-sack under the tight brown skirt and in her remarkably small delicate cream ears her round pearl drop earrings trembled like young white cherries.

"Hitch up a bit I said Ma! Give father a

bit o' room." Pop Larkin, who was thin, sharp, quick-eyed, jocular and already going shining bald on top, with narrow brown side-linings to make up for it, nudged against the mass of flesh like a piglet against a sow.

"Can't get the clutch in."

Ma hitched up a centimetre or two, still laughing.

"Perfick! Pop said. "No, it ain't though. Where'd I put that money?"

Ice-cream in his right hand, he began to feel in the pockets of his leather jacket with the other.

"I had it when I bought the ice-creams. Don't say I dropped it. Here, Ma, hold my ice-cream."

Ma held the ice-cream, taking a neat lick at a melting edge of it with a red sparkling tongue.

"All right, all right. Panic over. Put it in with the crisps."

Packets of potato crisps crackled out of his pocket, together with a bundle of pound notes, rolled up, perhaps a hundred of them, and clasped with a thick elastic band.

"Anybody want some crisps? Don't all speak at once!—anybody—"

"Please!"

Pop leaned out of the driving cab and with two deft back-hand movements threw packets of potato crisps into the back of the truck.

"Crisps, Ma?"

"Please," Ma said. "Lovely. Just what I wanted."

Pop took from his pocket a third packet of potato crisps and handed it over to Ma, taking his ice-cream back and licking the dripping underside of it at the same time.

"All right. All set now." He let in the clutch at last, holding his ice-cream against the wheel. "Perfick! Ma, take a look at that sky!"

Soon, in perfect sunlight, between orchards that lifted gentle pink branches in the lightest breath of wind, the truck was passing strawberry fields.

"Got the straw on," Pop said. "Won't be above anuvver few days now."

In June it would be strawberries for picking, followed by cherries before the month

The Darling Buds of May
Marriage for Mariette
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BIRTH OF A NOVEL: The first page of H. E. Bates's manuscript which he personally offered to Books and Bookmen to be reproduced here. It contains the first 17 lines of the extract printed on this page. The three lines at the top show the author's changes of mind over the title. It was originally "The Marriage of Mariette", then altered to "Marriage for Mariette", and finally to "The Darling Buds of May".

ended, and then more cherries through all the month of July. Sometimes, in good summers, apples began before August did, and with them early plums and pears. In August and again in September it was apples. In September also it was hops and in October potatoes. At strawberries, alone, with a big family, you could earn fifteen pounds a day.

"See that, kids?" Pop slowed down the truck, idling past the long rows of fresh yellow straw. "Anybody don't want to go strawberry-picking?"

In the answering burst of voices Pop thought, for the second time, that he couldn't hear the voice of Mariette.

"What's up with Mariette, Ma?"

"Mariette? Why?"

"Ain't heard her laughing much today."

"I expect she's thinking," Ma said.

Lost in silent astonishment at this possibility, Pop licked the last melting pink and chocolate-yellow cream from its paper and let the paper fly out of the window.

"Thinking? What's she got to think about?"

"She's going to have a baby."

"Oh?" Pop said. "Well that don't matter. Perfick. Jolly good."

Ma did not seem unduly worried either.

"Who is it?" Pop said.

"She can't make up her mind."

Ma sat happily munching crisps, staring at cherry orchards as they sailed past in the truck, every bough hung with swelling fruit, palest pink on the sunnier edges of the trees.

"Have to make up her mind some time, won't she?" Pop said.

"Why?"

"Oh! I just thought," Pop said.

THE JACKET: It depicts the country scene invaded by such modern notions as cars and television sets. The characters will remind many readers of Bates's glorious tales about that rich rural reprobate, Uncle Silas. Bates says that this character was based on a distant relative who lived to be over 90 and had usually drunk "enough beer to float the fleet".

