

English Hillbillies

"The Darling Buds of May," by H. E. Bates (Little, Brown. 219 pp. \$3.75), a departure for the author, is a comic tale about an English family's attempts to marry off a daughter.

By E. P. Monroe

AS IF to prove once and for all the truth of that old bromide that serious writers secretly yearn to write comedy, Englishman H. E. Bates, a normally serious novelist and short-story writer ("The Daffodil Sky," "The Sleepless Moon"), has chosen to people his latest effort, "The Darling Buds of May," with a group of characters who, initially at least, appear to have walked out of a burlesque of a Tennessee hillbilly ballad. And the results in this supposedly comic novel of English family folkways are rather more disconcerting and baffling than funny. Take, for example, the head of the family, Pop Larkin, a scrap-dealer and farmer with a gargantuan appetite who is given to such Okie-like expressions as "Perfick!" and "Hitch up a bit!" Or Ma, his common-law wife, whose stomach and thighs bulge "like a hop sack" and who "in her salmon jumper was almost two yards wide." And then, there are the Larkin children, whose names are Zinnia, Petunia, Primrose, Victoria, Montgomery (named for the General), and Mariette (a contraction of Marie Antoinette). In the true tradition of hillbilly ballad maidens, Mariette, an olive-skinned, black-haired beauty of seventeen, is thought to be pregnant. According to Ma, "it's either that Charles boy who worked at the farm or else that chap who works on the railroad line." Both these gentlemen, it turns out, are unavailable for matrimony so Mariette's future becomes something of a problem, which Pop gallantly sets out to solve. As luck would have it, a prim, young tax inspector named Charlton happens along to find out why Pop has filed no returns for the past year. "I got no time for forms," explains Pop. "Gawd Almighty, I got pigs to feed." Nonetheless young Charlton is invited to tea and from then on nature in the form of Mariette and a cocktail called a "Rolls-Royce," which is mixed by Pop, take over.

Fortunately, for the sake of literary sanity if nothing else, this is not quite the whole story. Somewhere along towards the middle of "The Darling Buds of May" there appear, for the purpose of organizing a gymkhana on Pop's "medder," two impoverished,

horse-loving aristocrats. These are a brigadier who wears patched clothes and a maiden lady named Edith Pilchester, "a fortyish, slightly mustached brunette shaped like a bolster," who finds everything "ghastly." Although one is inclined to agree, Miss Pilchester is at least a recognizable English type, and this is very reassuring. It is primarily through her intervention that we learn the Larkins are not the transplanted hillbillies they seem, but Mr. Bates's version of the new rich of England. Once you have this under your belt, everything takes on a different cast. Thanks to the contrast between old and new society, the ensuing high jinks, while hardly hilarious, do at least, turn up some humor. One could even, it must be admitted, end up with a certain gross affection for the hillbilly Larkins (but is it worth it?).

As for author Bates—well, the inside jacket cover of "The Darling Buds of May" presents him as being "in a new and Rabelaisian mood." To some readers this may explain everything. To this one, however, "Brobdingnagian" would seem more like it.

En Route to Ruin

"The Royal Succession," by Marcel Druon (translated by Humphrey Hare; Scribners. 254 pp. \$3.95), set in medieval France, tells of the political intrigue that surrounded Philip V.

By Thomas Caldecot Chubb

IN "The Royal Succession" Marcel Druon gives us a fourth installment of "The Accursed Kings," his intricate fictional chronicle of the medieval French monarchy. It is written with the same competence as the earlier three volumes, which have already given M. Druon a place among the best modern historical novelists.

But in this book the classroom lecturer, who up to now has been so conspicuous, steps down, and a writer of suspense and intrigue takes over. Whether it be in the conclave at Lyons, which elected Pope John XXII or in the royal palace at Vincennes, where widowed Queen Clemence gave birth to her posthumous son, the question is never "Why did this happen?" but, rather, "What happened next?"

This is not to say that "The Royal Succession" strays too often from factual accuracy—although I suspect

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