

Just About Perfick

HARK, HARK, THE LARK! By H. E. Bates. 158 pp. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. \$3.75.

By BEVERLY GRUNWALD

THE sad news is that "Hark Hark, The Lark!" is to be the last of a trilogy of the Larkin family. Readers who know H. E. Bates and his previous "The Darling Buds of May" and "A Breath of French Air" will surely rise in protest. Like Wodehouse's Jeeves, Bates' Larkins must continue in their own delightful milieu—in this case, the Kentish countryside.

Pop Larkin is still a seedy farmer whose place sprawls cozily amid junk heap and pig sty and just plain dirt; Pop is still less interested in farming than shady army-surplus deals and prefers sowing wild oats to picking strawberries. Pop remains sexy—and Ma generous. Big, fat and seven children notwithstanding, Ma enjoys Pop so much that she's content to share him with other less fulfilled females. In a hilarious court scene (where Pop acts his own attorney the way they do on the "telly,") proud Ma even shouts encouragement as he battles an accusation of attempted rape.

The "victim," Mrs. Jerebohm, is a less bountiful Rubens-type than Ma, for whom Pop feels sorry. She is the wife of a London stockbroker who becomes the new owner of Pop's white elephant, Gore Court, a vast, neglected estate adjoining the Larkins' humble shack. In one of the most dazzling real-estate palavers ever, the country bumpkin lets himself be "taken"

by Jerebohm, the city sophisticate.

Anybody who has ever had any dealings with real-estate operators will recognize the virtuosity of Pop's technique as he extols thistle-filled grounds, freshly-killed duck with red wine and the view of the sea on a clear day in winter when the leaves are down. At first convinced that this ancient property has the "class" he needs to fulfill his dreams of country squireship, Jerebohm is soon plagued by the fumed oak, fungus and forests in which he never succeeds in shooting anything. He is soured by his first fox hunt—from which he returns rain-soaked and saddle-sore, to swear off the fox as a mythical animal. Even Pop Larkin's sympathetic gift of pheasant can hardly brace his sagging morale. He longs for London and the familiar sounds of traffic. He is convinced that the country is strictly for the birds—or the Larkins. Tortured by cavernous, moldy rooms with fireplaces that won't draw and an absence of servants, the posh but miserable Jerebohms can well envy the Larkins, who sink their profits from the deal into a heated swimming pool.

Rough, uneducated but hardly simple folk, the Larkins live like sybarites. Their sex life is a comfortable, unleering romp; their love of good food and drink is equally passionate. They've grown accustomed to pink champagne, truffles, pheasant and venison. Illiterate Ma is a fancy cook who has learned a lot from their trip to France, including an appreciation for Schiaparelli's bath oil and sheer chiffon nightgowns. In short, the raffish and lower-class Larkins exhibit all the love of luxury that a self-conscious, broke and down-trodden British upper class has long since lost.

There's no doubt about it—the Larkins know how to enjoy life, and Mr. Bates knows how to convey that enjoyment to his readers. For those who care to listen, "Hark, Hark, the Lark!" really sings, as Pop would put it, just about "perfick."

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