

Something Short and Sweet¹

reviewed by Ronald Lewin

H. E. BATES nowadays is like a man walking in Paradise after the Fall. With that heightened sensibility which makes vivid every page he writes, he discovers beauty everywhere, and whether he is describing his Rabelaisian Uncle Silas with his wet red lips and lascivious eye, or the small boy in *The Captain* who, anguished at the destruction of his own pet, horribly starves to death the captain's greyhound; whether it is the half-realized passionate adoration of her friend Lorn by Breeze Ansty, or, in *The Kimono*, the contentment which comes from sexual fulfilment, his characters and the world in which they live are exquisitely, economically presented. Arnold Bennett said that he wrote in the faith that everything ugly has an aspect of beauty, and H. E. Bates must have the same creed. Nothing seems to come to him as merely horrible, as incapable of presentation in moving and lovely words.

But he is not carried away by this capacity for the apprehension of 'the principle of beauty in all things'. He does not simply sit back and enjoy this Paradisal world in which he seems enfranchised. He selects, he gives significance. There must be a strong, almost mastering temptation, when one can describe country sights and country people so simply and yet with such colour, to drift into a kind of optimism, to devote oneself to writing about a beauty which is never bitter-sweet. But in Mr. Bates's Eden/Adam and

¹ *Something Short and Sweet*, by H. E. Bates (Crown 8vo. 7s. 6d.)

Eve have already fallen. The stories he tells are often, in this collection, an account of futility and unhappiness. In *Cloudburst* the sky, the countryside, the reapers have each their special grace: but the rain comes and the crops are ruined and the farmer is left quarrelling with his wife in a useless, uncomprehending petulance. The midget Baby Doll in *Purchase's Living Wonders* has a delicate fragile charm more moving to witness than even Mr. de la Mare's memoir-writer: but her love for Purchase is a bitter thing to watch. The remedy for baldness in *Italian Haircut* leaves the experimenter as bald as ever; in *The Kimono* physical passion, and in *Breeze Ansty* the sublimated love of one girl for another, both run out in futility. And *Spring Snow*, which describes the suffering of a girl in fruitless labour, seems to sour everything sweet in Paradise.

But if H. E. Bates has not given himself up to wallowing without discrimination in beautiful experiences which carry with them no pain, no more is he an unsubtle masochist finding nothing but horror in the world. He apprehends the ugly and the beautiful, but he also has an eye for the comic. Even in the story of the professor who loved cats, readers will find a humorous as well as a sinister ring in the final 'Where exactly had we got to?' And Uncle Silas is a saving grace. He reappears in two stories, *The Sow and Silas*, and *Finger Wet, Finger Dry*. Reading of the feline Professor, or the death in *The Case of Miss Lomas*, or the waning of passion in *The Kimono*, you seem to be looking at a world gone awry: but Uncle Silas takes you back to the comfortable sanity of Falstaff and the elder Weller, and Eden seems not so bad after all.