

# A Moving Novel of English Country Folk

THE POACHER. By H. E. Bates.  
273 pp. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$2.50.

IN this novel H. E. Bates gives evidence of a splendidly developing talent. Best known, at least in this country, for his volumes of short stories, he cannot help but become better known with the publication of "The Poacher." His atmospheric and delicate short stories were uniformly fine in workmanship but rather tenuous in substance. Little of them remained to the reader after the book was laid aside except an impression of the writer's conscious skill in expressing something which seemed, in retrospect, hardly worth the expenditure of so much industry and talent.

In this novel, however, Mr. Bates has found a subject better suited to his powers and has created a character—commonplace enough, it is true—who happens to be impressively real. Luke Bishop's father was a poacher—a big, cunning, soft-

months of work as a farm laborer, under a name not his own, his love affair with a servant girl on the farm, all pass with the same dull unreality he had felt since the death of his father.

Married to Lily, he returns home and with the help of his aunt rents a small farm from which he manages to wring a meager living. Lily, however, is ambitious. If Luke proves intractable—and his manners and habits of life seem quite irreclaimable—she means to have a measure of sound lower middle-class respectability for herself and her two daughters. Luke, who had been bitterly disappointed by the lack of a son, plows his fields stolidly, butchers his hogs and markets his produce and is really happy only when, once more and in a small way, he takes up poaching as a diversion.

The tempo of the book changes in its latter half, although the effect is not at all inharmonious. The story merely gathers speed, covers more ground in a briefer space—as

a man's own life seems to in its latter half. Thus the years pass almost unnoticed over Luke's head, and the world around him has changed:

Gone in a minute were the half days to watch a circus procession, the whole days to follow the foxhounds, the sobering-up Mondays, the odd hours off for political arguments or fights to settle what Bradlaugh said, and finally and most of all the long weeks taken off in the late Summer for the harvest. The flame of that shifting and independent life was suddenly snuffed out. And in its place came an artificial, fixed, incandescent gas-flame kind of life, a life that burned for a given period and was turned off.

Living more and more in the past as the years rolled by, Luke was revived to the present by the birth of his grandson and began to plan for the boy's future. What money he had inherited after his aunt's death he made over to young Edward's father to be expended on his education. And in his own way

footed man with no taste at all for honest work. Luke admired him extravagantly. The most thrilling nights of his boyhood were spent scouting the countryside with his father, eluding the gamekeepers, setting snares for rabbits, or putting up nets, and hunting with ferrets. The secrecy, the skill, the spice of danger, the silent beauty of the woods at night, were all a part of the spell of this outlawry.

One night, further afield than usual, they were surprised by an armed keeper. Although they got safely away and home again, Buck Bishop died as a result of a gunshot wound received during the chase. Luke, some while later, came upon the body of the keeper, who had evidently been murdered. Not at best a thoughtful youth, he fled from the scene precipitately, fearful that the obvious motive of revenge would connect him with the crime. His



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he began to contribute to that education, teaching the boy the ways of the fields and woods, how to make and set a snare, how to break a rabbit's neck with a single light blow from the side of the hand. His parents not unreasonably protested, especially when the child got himself arrested with a snare in his possession.

The final episode of the tale, onelast ill-fated poaching expedition which lands the aging Luke in jail and from which he returns to find himself homeless and a pauper, is a fitting conclusion to this chronicle of a deep and simple nature. Beautifully and without affectation Mr. Bates has expressed through the story of Luke Bishop's life his deep feeling for the life of the English countryside, for the changes which have come over it in the last half century and his own nostalgic regret for the order which has passed.