

Man Who Writes With the Dignity of Hardy

H. E. Bates Treats Sordid Human Nature on an English Farm With Charity and Imaginative Art



H. E. Bates

A HOUSE OF WOMEN.

By H. E. Bates . . . 305 pp.
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Reviewed by
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AMONG observers who watch for and welcome the appearance of perdurable values in fiction there is an increasing disposition to watch for and welcome the work of H. E. Bates, the young Englishman whose "A House of Women" is his latest novel. In it will be found not a few of the stable qualities which made the earlier work of Hardy and Moore conspicuously notable before their genius came to full fruition.

Mr. Bates observes life with the same deliberate, detached and yet sympathetic attitude, selects from it what he needs for the purposes of his art, and constructs a story which moves us by its simple and sincere presentation of convincing character and circumstance. No more authentic picture of the human scene it seeks to portray has been painted in the fiction of this generation. There is not a character or situation in it which one might not expect to encounter in the agricultural shires. Every one and everything grows so naturally out of the environment that the illusion of inevitable life is sustained from the first page to the last. But the realism is neither photographic nor phonographic nor journalistic: it is realism captured for us with a profound sense of artistic order.

The central character is Rosie Perkins, barmaid at The Angel, in Orthingford, and daughter of its shiftless, gambling and self-pitiful proprietor, a vivid, flashily dressed and overworked girl whose vitality and

splendid figure make the customers at the bar lust after her. But they have to reckon with her ready tongue and her quick temper, for, though Rosie has no well defined moral scruples, she has taste and discrimination according to her own standards.

To her bar comes Tom Jefferys, a stolid and almost inarticulate young farmer whose father's death has left him head of a family consisting of himself, his mother, a younger brother and two frustrated sisters, a family reared in, and living in, the strictest Nonconformist traditions, narrow, puritanical, chapel-going and psalm-singing. In the way of a patient ox he pays court to Rosie, who finally agrees to marry him because she grows weary of her father's ways and the ceaseless grind of the pub, and is attracted by the apparent comfort, ease and plenty of life on the farm.

Rosie does not think either long or deeply over what this change of existence implies, does not realize that she is throwing in her lot with a family where the women-folk regard her as a scarlet woman who has seduced and bedevilled the man they look up to. Her motto then, as it is to be her motto at the book's close, is: "I'll try anything once." And, in every sense of the word, she does try. She submits to the dull demands of sex in Tom; she works in the fields and the barns as hard as the rest; but she never accepts, nor even understands, the moral and social standards of the Jefferys women: they are rooted in the clay of the reluctant soil, and she in the warm, even if sordid, sociability of the pub. Words come trippingly to her tongue that shock these women, who hate her all the more because not only her husband but the younger brother, Frankie, is under her spell.

The grind of the farm, the atmosphere of hate, malice and envious jealousy, the

dreary mating with Tom, pile up storms within her and drive her on to seduce Frankie to satisfy her emotional hunger—an affair which ends tragically.

Then comes the World War and, after a period, Tom "joins up" with that same sense of elemental duty he shows in everything else. There is no open break between him and Rosie until he returns wounded and bedridden, an irascible, unreasonable, uncontrollable, suspicious tyrant in his own house. Then comes tragedy for Tom, and escape for Rosie.

Here, obviously, is a powerful theme, its elements in the abundant and amoral vitality of Rosie, in the shriveled and viperish natures of the Jefferys women, in Tom's unimaginative devotion and hatred, in the tragic appeal of Frankie. And it is treated validly by Mr. Bates, the very quietness of his method adding to the impressiveness of

the picture. There is not a really likable character in the book unless one likes Rosie for her abundance and her capacity, at the end as at the beginning, to face destiny with an indomitable readiness for adventure. But there is not a character which does not interest us because of the vigor and vividness with which it is drawn. The contrast between the sensuality of Rosie and that of her hypocritical sister, between a frank and a furtive response to sex, is unforgettable.

Unless one is prepared to face human nature in some of its ugliest and meanest aspects one should not read Mr. Bates's book, but if one is prepared to face it, to understand it and, with infinite charity, to sympathize with it, one will find here a story worthy of very high praise for the sincerity of its feeling, the deftness of its craftsmanship, and the integrity of its imagination.