

"A House of Women" and Other Recent Works of Fiction

A HOUSE OF WOMEN. By H. E. Bates. 305 pp. New York: Henry Holt & Co. \$2.

AS an artist Mr. Blake delights in overpowering sensuousness—"the rich smell of rich land well farmed and well mucked," with "midsummer rising in the land like cream." As an analyst he is acutely conscious of the passions and jealousies that spring from this golden environment. But it is the former of the two creative moods that has the stronger hold upon him. In this novel the more primitive emotions—a man's idolization of his lush farm, a woman's surrender to earth's druglike sweetness—are magnificently full-blown, but the subtler motives of envy and revenge which point to the tragic outcome seem feeble by comparison. In his knowledge of the almost too rich English countryside Mr. Bates rivals the Thomas Hardy of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," but, on the other hand, his book is lacking in that great novel's sustained inevitability of incident. This reader, remembering the lavish impressionism of some of Mr. Bates's short stories, wonders whether the long narrative form is not a strain upon his special talents.

The book has many passages of pictorial brilliance. The central

figure, Rosie the barmaid, is a splendid portrait done with the broad sweep of a Rubens bacchante. One thinks of her afterward in photographic flashes: Rosie hammering at the piano or sweeping out the filth in her father's pub. Rosie agape over the scented expanses of her lover's farm, at the sumptuousness of the tea spread out to dazzle her by his spindly sisters. Then, later, Rosie stunned by the insensibility of the man she has married and the back-breaking routine behind the harvest yield. An Anglo-Saxon goddess of pleasure is Rosie, strangely thwarted but ultimately triumphant.

To call this book "A House of Women," however, strikes this reader as somewhat pointless. For it is the character of Tom Jeffrey, rather than his sisters, that competes for Rosie's laurels. This dogged farmer, though he could not satisfy Rosie's sort of passion, had a good bit of earthy power himself. His mole-blind absorption in his farm, his animal fury when, so badly wounded in the war that he is unable to do more than turn wheat grains self-pityingly in his hand, he discovers that Rosie once betrayed him through his now dead brother—these are forces as natural as the erosion of rock by a stream of water.

But why must authors persist in thrusting forward weak characters as stumblingblocks? Probably this does happen in real life, but it impedes dramatic swiftness. In this case it is Tom's spinster sisters with their jealousy of Rosie's lusty womanhood that garble the action. "Our Maudie" smoulders tiresomely throughout the book. When she finally does flame up the results are terrific.

As a whole the book resembles a series of separately framed pictures rather than a single broad canvas. In looking at them one is forced continually to change one's stance. But if sometimes one has to lean forward laboriously to study the individual portraits, one can always stand back and surrender to the hypnotic spell of the landscapes.

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