

Countryside

A COUNTRYMAN WATCHES THE WAR BATTLE IN KENTISH SKIES

IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY. By H. E. BATES. Illustrated by C. F. TUNNICLIFFE. Country Life. 10s. 6d.

In these severe days, when we are all inclined to think of the country in terms of food productivity, Mr. Bates is concerned to remind us of its other qualities. Not that his book ignores the war, except in its size and handsome appearance: on the contrary, the scenes which he describes, not without a discernible heaviness and melancholy, or the personal reflections which they inspire, are in great part determined by it. Mr. Bates lives, or did live,

as himself, yet, man being of a more complex fashion, he confesses to a restlessness and a disturbance of mind which, in his case, seeks consolation in that calmest of sports—fishing. It is, he declares, an hereditary pursuit, and he describes an enthusiastic and gifted forebear, and odd habits and discoveries, with much humour and charm. Moreover, it makes it seem quite natural and orderly for a chapter on "The Strangeness of Fish" to go from speculations on the fate of the countryside after the war to some results of the last one, the surprisingly light weights of birds (a wren weighs two and three-quarter drachms) and, finally, the incalculable habits and capricious behaviour of fish and the limited extent to which they are understood.

The fortunate fact is that Mr. Bates is no mere artist in words, or even his best pictures would be worth less than they are. He is a practical man, descendant of men who followed the plough; he has opinions usually founded on hard facts, personal experience and close observation, and, however much we are delighted by such nostalgic reminiscences as "Victorian Garden"—"the colours everywhere wrong according to correct standards, and yet somehow right"—by a picture of the "Great Snow", which is tending to arrive in print two years late, and by such musings as "Flowers on Downland" or "Overture to Summer," our present temper is for stiffer stuff. Of this Mr. Bates gives us sufficient to make us wish for more. True countrymen at least would be interested to hear of the parish council—Mr. Bates is chairman of his own—in greater detail, and there is general curiosity about a subject which Mr. Bates touches on shrewdly but too lightly—the future place and perhaps prophecy, in one remark:—

of the countryside. There is much penetration, and perhaps prophecy, in one remark:—

It may be part of the fatality of wars that a man appears to fight for one thing and succeeds only in getting something entirely different. In 1914 no slogans appeared to urge a fight for the smashing of the squirearchy, the undermining of the Church, or the creation of a larger middle class; yet these were among the most positive results of the conflict.

The book is illustrated with numerous wood engravings by C. F. Tunnicliffe, some of them successful in their bold and dramatic composition, others a little disappointing in their tendency to clumsiness of line and wooliness of masses.



Illustration by C. F. Tunnicliffe, from "In the Heart of the Country"

in Kent. It was a sky, if not a field, of battle, and as he fished on a still, clear afternoon "scores of fish leapt high out of the lake after a tremendous and very close explosion." He saw, too, many other strange signs and indications of war—a shower of twinkling metallic objects drop into the pool, "a giant convoluted of pure white silk float down to rest," "small silver fish and "celestial sea-gulls" and trails of white vapour in the sky, and he heard thunder shake the earth on days when there obviously was no thunder.

No one can describe what Mr. Bates calls the magnificent indifference of the seasons with so sensible and so shapely an awareness