

## VISION IN BURMA

H. E. BATES: *The Purple Plain*. Michael Joseph. 10s. 6d.

Mr. Bates is a romantic writer who compels our admiration by the limpid beauty of his prose and by a gift for sustained dramatic narrative which reminds us at times of Conrad. Human nature and the inner current of life are not his forte. He is at his best, therefore, in the kind of novel like the present, which is really a long short story constructed round a single dramatic experience. Grim and horrifying enough in detail, it is in essence a lyrical exposition of the qualities of courage and endurance in the human soul.

The scene is Burma. "Shy flocks of small banana-green parrots had begun to come back to the pipul trees about the bombed pagoda. But across the rice-fields, scorched and barren now from the long dry season, only a few white egrets stepped daintily like ghostly cranes about the yellow dust in the heat-haze. Nothing else moved across the great plain where for three years no rice had grown." In one of the tents of the isolated airfield Squadron Leader Forrester, a man driven almost beyond the bounds of sanity by the climate and by private grief, is sweating and gasping for breath and goading his unfortunate companion. He has reached a point of desperation when he must either crack up altogether or be jolted back into a fresh desire for life. His whole period of service has been spent in a furious attempt to get himself killed. At the moment he is a menace to the community.

On a trip to a neighbouring village he meets a Burmese girl of great beauty who provides the necessary impulse to recovery. His vision of her, combined with a vivid impression of a flying

accident—a sudden perception of the meaning of death—gives him the new desire for life which is to sustain him in the trial of endurance ahead.

It is on what looks like a simple flight to a neighbouring post that Forrester, his young navigator and a conscientious little intelligence officer crash into the middle of the wild expanse of hills, rocks, sand and forest beyond the Burmese plain. In the terrible

walk to the river which follows, with Forrester carrying the wounded boy Carrington under the pitiless Burmese sun, the well-behaved and meticulous but unresilient Blore collapses under the strain and shoots himself. The other two, sustained by a desperate gaiety and the passionate will to survive, struggle through to the end.

Mr. Bates describes this infernal journey with its thirst, its delirium, its pain, its blazing heat, its moments of transcendental beauty, with extraordinary power. The reader has a profound sensation of the physical minuteness of man in relation to nature, and at the same time of his spiritual obduracy.

The account of this pilgrimage, through a wild landscape superbly described, is a *tour de force*. The mind of the man who accomplishes it, and the love which inspires him are not to be analysed too closely. The theme is man at his simplest, and perhaps at his best, in conflict with death. If we recoil slightly from the tender happiness and the beautiful prose of the ending, it is because of a reluctant knowledge outside the scope of the story that the end of one hard day means the beginning of another; because the Burma of Forrester's new vision is a country which does not exist.