

# Evacuating Burma

THE JACARANDA TREE. By H. E. Bates. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1949. 299 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by EDMUND FULLER

THE journey is one of the great narrative devices, and of journeys, the flight is probably the most ancient in tradition and the most fruitful in dramatic significance. "The Jacaranda Tree" is a story of flight and, like Mr. Bates's previous book, "The Purple Plain," its setting is Burma.

Paterson, the manager of a rice mill on the upper Irrawaddy River, learning that the Japs are approaching, prepares to evacuate the handful of English people from the village. All are going except Dr. Fielding, who will not leave his hospital, and Miss Ross, who has adopted Buddhism and awaits events with tranquillity.

There is no way out except northward by car through jungles and mountains to India on a road that may or may not prove passable. The relations of his fellow countrymen toward Paterson are scarcely cordial. He is a newcomer to Asia. His ways are not blessed by colonial tradition. He is efficient, blunt, and original in the performance of his duties. He had failed to join the Swimming Club, remarking that he wished to swim in water, not people. Worst of all, his dealings with the Burmese were far too informal, as if they were human beings; and he lived openly with a Burmese girl.

Portman, the assistant manager,

hated him for his position. Mrs. Portman, whose beauty was the sole consolation of her life, found him bafflingly unresponsive to the most open invitations. Mrs. McNairn hated him for "trifling with her daughter's affections," whereas Connie McNairn rather hated herself, for the bygone situation with Paterson had been wholly of her own creation. Betteson was constantly worrying over situations that would "raise trick issues," which Paterson brusquely dismissed. Mrs. Betteson was simply somewhat harmlessly mad. Major Brain, who was reluctant to leave, hated no one.

These, together with the Eurasian nurse, Miss Allison, Paterson's Burmese mistress, and her young brother, formed the party which set out in two automobiles. What befalls them, severally, is the substance of Mr. Bates's story.

There is good story-telling here. There are keen insights into the end of a regime. The Portmans are eager to regain India, where they had acquired their colonial attitudes. But India will not be the same India, and we may be sure that Burma will never be the same Burma.

There is too much striving for an irrelevant sensuousness: too much "pinning under the transparent silk all the pulsating, excited softness of her flesh." But balancing this are Bates's genuine gifts for event, for place, for character. The movement is swift. The panorama of jungle and mountain, all the details of terrain are vivid. Paterson is well realized, though theatrically conceived. Major Brain is sensitively and quietly studied as he faces the moral dilemma this flight creates in his own soul.

It is Mrs. Betteson who becomes the tour de force of this story. And in the skilful development accorded to her we see a similarity to some of the characterizations of Nevil Shute. There is much in common in the work of these two men. Both are craftsmen of great skill, bringing comfort and ease to the nervous reader scarred by the inept writing in much current fiction. Both represent elements of sincerity and honesty mingled with that artificiality somehow attendant upon too smooth a story which is vulgarly called "slick."

The final merits of Mr. Bates's "Jacaranda Tree" is that, though precipitated by the war, it is not a war story; and that the disasters which befall some of these people proceed not from the circumstances of war but from within themselves.



H. E. Bates—"gifts for event, for place, for character."