

WITHOUT MASKS

H. E. BATES : *The Jacaranda Tree*. Michael Joseph. 9s. 6d.

The form of Mr. Bates's book is a familiar one to readers of modern fiction. A number of people who normally have little contact with one another are brought into proximity through the stress of unusual circumstances; and their reactions are used to develop our knowledge of their real characters, as opposed to the appearance generally presented by the mask of social convention. In this case the occasion is the Japanese invasion of Burma, the characters a group of English men and women, a Eurasian nurse and a native boy and girl; and they are bundled together on a journey across Burma in two cars.

Mr. Bates's treatment of this familiar situation, however, is far from conventional: there is a freshness and enthusiasm about his writing in *The Jacaranda Tree* that entitles the book to rank with his very best work. The subsidiary characters are almost over-typical English colonists, but they are well drawn: the dissatisfied under-manager of a rice-mill, the defeated agent of a shipping company, their unhappy or brutalized wives, an ideal colonial widow with a face of "arid shantung-yellow texture" and her romantic daughter. These failures are given body by their

reactions to the successful and efficient Paterson, sent out freshly from England as manager of the rice-mill. Paterson does all the wrong things—refuses to join the swimming club, takes a native girl to live with him, and remains isolated from the rest of the white community, who view his life with a mingling of envy, desire and distrust. It is, naturally, Paterson who organizes the departure, who tells the others what luggage shall be taken; naturally, also, he overrides their protests at his determination to make his Burmese mistress and her young brother members of the party. Paterson is the key of Mr. Bates's story; and it is unfortunate that he is the least convincing character in the book, and that his actions are never fully credible because Mr. Bates has provided no emotional background for them.

But if there is weakness at the centre of Mr. Bates's book, it remains a remarkably exciting and well-told story. The journey across Burma is handled with extreme skill, the moments of personal doubt, jealousy and frustration felt by each of the party in turn are made convincing by under-statement, and the tragedies when they come are dealt with in a matter-of-fact prose of which Mr. Bates shows an absolute mastery.