

Violence and Death in Kashmir



H. E. Bates—"nowhere a key to meaning."

THE SCARLET SWORD. By H. E. Bates. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 282 pp. \$3.

By NATHAN L. ROTHMAN

UPON the level of sheer reporting H. E. Bates does a brilliant job. Much of his tale of the descent of the Moslems upon a Catholic mission in Kashmir depends on his fine and perceptive recording of detail: the minutiae of life in the mission just before and just after the attack; the characters of the two priests, the nurses, the Hindu women, the colonel, the war correspondent; the impact upon these of violence and death; the ways in which the climate of their lives is altered, as by a thunderclap. There is the suggestion everywhere of the chosen—or the choosing—perceptions of a poetic intelligence. So that upon this level alone it is easy to cite "The Scarlet Sword" as a book of constant freshness and literary quality. There is at least one person in it—Father Simpson—whose growth and stirring under pressure offer a communicable experience to the reader. (Not quite as much can be said of the other focal character, Crane, the war correspondent.)

Yet I am less impressed with the novel than I would have been if Mr. Bates had furnished somewhere in it some frame of reference for these shocking events. A band of Pathans and Afridis burst upon the scene like mad Martians dropped out of the sky, and what ensues can be described only as havoc. Murder, beating, rape, and massacre follow one another too swiftly to be intelligently realized by the shocked inhabitants of the mission:

the two priests, the British colonel and his wife, the Hindus who have come here for shelter ahead of the storm, the war correspondent, the nurses on duty. They are engulfed, all of them, exactly as though a tidal wave had swept in upon the land, and each struggles in single isolation to keep breath in his or her nostrils. The Hindu may know what is happening, but they keep silence. The young colonel walks through, up to the moment of his death, with the unhesitating and incurious confidence of the Mr. Britling he is. Crane, the correspondent, operates always with the cynical calm that is made to seem a natural attribute of his trade; he makes the split-second decisions and has the split-second luck of the hero of fiction, with even time and libido enough for a compelling love affair amidst the carnage. Only Father Simpson it seems to me is really touched by these horrors, deeper than flesh-deep. He does experience more than fear for his skin, and it is his sufferings which hold whatever meaning the book may possess. And yet even he feels rather than understands.

Nobody in the story seems to know what is going on or why; nowhere in it does Mr. Bates offer a key to the meaning of this episode. Any reader will have been aware of the terrible riots that split India upon the threshold of her independence. It would not seem possible to write a novel of just that period without placing it somewhere within the framework of national events, without getting into it some of the political struggle (and its significance) which is the true source of the action. It is baffling to find this missing from Mr. Bates's book. Without it, the bloody episode is quite meaningless. A whole dimension is missing. Thus, for the recording of the events of a week in Kashmir Mr. Bates must be rated high indeed; for background and meaning: incomplete.

Fiction Notes

POUND FOOLISH. By Robert Mollay. Lippincott. \$3. Mr. Mollay has an admirable gift for sustained comedy. He has peopled this novel, like its predecessor "Pride's Way," with a multitude of odd but always believable characters, who will remain in the reader's memory when the protagonists of more pretentious stories are forgotten. He sees the humor inherent in their absorption in their own small affairs and has set it down

(Continued on page 33)