

At the End Is Loneliness

COLONEL JULIAN AND OTHER
STORIES. By H. E. Bates. 240 pp.
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By WILLIAM PEDEN

THIS distinguished collection of fifteen short stories by the British author of "Fair Stood the Wind for France" and "The Purple Plain" invites favorable comparison with the best of A. E. Coppard or Elizabeth Bowen or V. S. Pritchett. Indeed, these stories make the work of many of H. E. Bates' contemporaries in England or here in America appear, in comparison, either amateurish or pretentious.

Mr. Bates' primary concern is, like Miss Bowen's, the "problem of human unknowableness," and one might say that collectively his stories constitute an anatomy of loneliness. Though admirably varied in subject matter, they are essentially somber in tone. With the exception of two genuinely humorous sketches involving a robust nonagenarian, they depict with varying degrees of skepticism or compassion the deterioration of the individual ego. Mr. Bates' characters struggle for a kind of unattainable self-realization, if not completely in vain, certainly without success.

With loneliness their destiny, they wander like ghosts through the dry rot of a crumbling manor house or decaying farmhouse, their voices unheard above the sound of the restless sea or lost among the orderly tea rows of an Indian plantation. Some, like the masculine young woman of "A Girl Named Peter," are denied love because of physical or emotional traits over which they can exercise little if any control. Others, like the lovers of "The Lighthouse,"

are frustrated by custom and tradition and social mores, still others by fear, or stupidity, or by the sheer perversity of things as they are.

Still others struggle to achieve an inevitable defeat. Or, like the protagonist of "The Frontier," they merely give up. "He had been traveling up and down there, in the same way, for twenty years. He had a long lean figure and a pale face, rather dreamy and prematurely gray and in very hot weather blue-lipped, that had become almost Indianized, giving him a look of Asiatic delicacy. He had learned, very early, that in the East time was an immensity that does not matter; that it is better not to get excited; that what does not happen to-day will happen tomorrow and that death, it is very probable, will come between. His chief concern was not to shout, not to worry, not to get excited, but to grow and manufacture a tolerably excellent grade of tea."

YET Mr. Bates seldom if ever creates a character to humiliate or destroy him for the sake of the humiliation or destruction. His people are unheroic, to be sure: a sixtyish major with three different sets of false teeth and a shrewish wife; an ignorant farmer who temporarily finds happiness by way of the agony columns; a sensitive young woman badgered in a world of Philistines. They are not, however, ignoble, and long after their fate has been settled, they linger disturbingly in the reader's mind. Mr. Bates avoids the sensational or the melodramatic; through an unerring selection of the exact gesture or thought or act or incident, he reveals the very essence of his characters' thwarted personalities.

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