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## PREFACE

The stories forming the selection in this book have been gathered from a period of nearly twenty years: the earliest of them dating from the mid nineteen-twenties, the most recent of them from the middle years of the War. Indeed, with the exception of one story, none of them belongs to later than 1940. All of them were written in the days of pre-atomic rumbling that we called peace-time. They were published at a time when the short story, nurtured by the ardour of small groups of writers, editors and publishers, flourished with considerable difficulty in a world made prejudiced by the wide vogue of chronicle novels, of which Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* may be said to be the precursor. This vogue and its success were based partly on a notion that because a work is long—or a picture large—it must therefore be much more worth serious attention than a work that is small, and partly on the fact that the larger proportion of novel readers are women, who like to identify themselves, for as long as possible and as deeply as possible, with characters projected for them on to the printed page. The distillation of human experience that we call the novel carries within itself, in fact, the seed of its own popularity; for there is no aspect of human life and emotion, however intimate, improbable or secret, with which it cannot deal; and there is no sort of character, however complex, irrational or splendid, with which even the most wretched reader cannot at some time or other identify himself, with temporary profit or pleasure. "Fiction," said Thackeray, "carries a greater amount of truth in solution than the volume which purports to be all true." In this very fact lies not only the novel's potentiality for greatness as literature, but the reason for its undiminished vogue among all classes of readers all over the world. The novel, with infinite flexibility, gives us as no other literary form not only the chance to see ourselves as others see us but ourselves as we imagine we might have been.

SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF H. E. BATES

Why this popularity does not extend to the short story, which is fiction also, is one of those problems that continue to exercise literary commentators, defeating explanation. Art, it may be observed, is like kissing; it requires some co-operation from both sides. The more subtle the form of love, the more subtle the contribution demanded of the art of the short story the more subtle, than that demanded in the novel. Naturally the reader is offered less; only by contributing something of himself will he acquire more. The modern short story is an embellished hint of a life that lies outside it. Its very brevity precludes very detailed explanations. The reader must search out, beyond the printed page, and explain for himself those things that the writer, in the restraint of his craft, has only partially revealed.

It follows that the number of readers who can do this or will do this is rather limited. Most readers of fiction like to have their parcels neatly tied; they like the ends of every thread of character to be gathered carefully together, on the final page, and tucked away. The modern short story does not do this. In form it is rounded off; in implication and in effect it strays untidily off, groping with nervous strings at scenes and emotions and existences beyond its final word. This happy excursive freedom gives it a flexibility even greater than that of the novel itself; it enables it to offer, by implication, riches of experience that will vary with every reader according to his perception, his susceptibility and his capacity to fill in the colour of worlds only half suggested. Like Impressionism, it plays with surface light, revealing the full subtlety, solidarity and depth of life beyond surface charm only when the reader brings to it the complete contribution of a sympathetic eye.

H. E. BATES.

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