

## Male-Female Trouble

*"The Nature of Love,"* by H. E. Bates (Little, Brown. 217 pp. \$3.50), is a gathering of three long short stories by a talented British writer dealing with the affairs of some not altogether nice women.

By Oliver La Farge

THE well-written trilogy H. E. Bates is offering under the name of "The Nature of Love," might, perhaps, be better entitled "The Nature of Desire," since there is in it little of love other than the magnetic attraction to each other of male and female, and the principal women of the stories have decidedly round heels. There is a partial exception in the first story, but there the sentiment of love hardly progresses beyond a rudimentary and formless stage. The stories do not constitute an inquiry into the nature of love; but then, if we ever start damning books for ill-fitting titles, what writer would go scot free?

The first story, "Dulcima," is something of a tour de force. Presenting us with an almost repulsive, mean-spirited heroine, having neither virtue nor passion, avaricious on a niggardly scale, it nonetheless convinces the reader that when this woman experiences something approaching real love, her character will change. Dulcima herself, painfully groping towards self-respect, dealing with

sensations she cannot verbalize, is a fine study. The influence upon her of a partial release from drab hopelessness is handled well and with fine restraint. The story is a neat, credible triangle with a credible, tragic ending.

The other two stories are also on the tragic side, but less deeply so, since in neither does the central situation contain mutuality of love or equally sustained desire. The protagonists move in a sort of formal dance; the reader does not feel that truly great passion is present. He also knows, and feels that the main character should know, that from the outset the affair has no future.

We do not ask that every writer give us profound tragedy. There is no reason to believe that Mr. Bates was trying to do so, and he writes like a man who knows very well what he is doing. He presents us with intriguing situations in a variety of well-presented settings, builds up his characters with many small, perfectly placed brush-strokes, and tells a smooth, rounded story.

The last of the three is laid in Malaya, but that is not why the writing carries a suggestion of Maugham and back of that a faint reminiscence of Conrad. It is in the technique, the manner in which detail is applied, and the sophistication of the writer himself. The storytelling is in the best of the English tradition, and has a notable quality of neatness.

In this age of brief, hurried stories tailored to the preferences of slick magazine readers, it is a pleasure to settle down once more to full, unhurried narrative underlaid by a good raconteur's development of background. The 4,500-word taboo that afflicts much American short-story writing enforces undernourished tales, notable chiefly for the cleverness of their condensation. Those writers who escape that limitation in the little and special magazines seldom have the technical skill to make good use of their freedom. The art is in the many details every one of which serves a useful purpose and all of which hold the reader's interest. Out of them come real characterization and the priceless illusion of reality.

"The Nature of Love" is grown-up writing for grown-ups, the work of a real craftsman.



H. E. Bates—"Maugham and Conrad."