

The Stout English

"The Feast of July," by H. E. Bates (Little, Brown, 246 pp. \$3.50), is the story of a girl named Bella who has a catalytic effect on a family she joins; and particularly the three brothers who belong to it.

By Oliver LaFarge

ONE may roughly generalize that in the past English writing about the lower classes was from above downwards. Dickens, who knew and cared about his subjects, caricatured them or enlarged them to display them to their betters. H. G. Wells was perhaps the first writer of consequence to treat the lower classes from the inside. He was consciously, if not self-consciously, identified with them, but even he got up on an intellectual ladder to watch them, and shouted at the bourgeoisie to come and look.

Novels such as H. E. Bates's "The Feast of July" descend from Wells on the one hand, on the other from the Arcadian, localistic, rural tales with which British writing has always been beset. This one tells a forthright tale about a small number of working people who are seen as persons in their own right. The telling is without condescension and is kept always within the point of view, the frame, of the characters themselves.

If the British develop a school of this kind of writing about the unquaint poor, the extremely poor, it will differ markedly from the exist-



—G. Scott Bushe.

H. E. Bates—"richly dramatic."

ing American school. It will resemble neither "Tobacco Road" nor "The Grapes of Wrath." We assume that poverty is not a sin, but a wrong, an offense upon its victims, and must lead to rootlessness, loss of self-respect, and instability if not to degradation. Perhaps in America this is true.

IF EXISTING British writing can be believed (and anyone who was in London during the Battle of Britain will be ready to believe it) the mass of the British poor retain the strong self-respect, the customs, the stability that are the strength of a nation. They may go hungry on occasion, but they mind both their manners and their morals, and no one can push them around. Hence writers do not condole with them or yearn over them. They tell about them, not without admiration, and if the telling will help towards the ultimate elimination of poverty so much the better.

The structure of this story is dramatic and effective. The central character, Bella, is a sympathetic and credibly unusual young woman who is projected into a family, the members of which are individuals in their own rights. She acts as a reagent to bring out their various characters. Particularly she affects the three brothers, each of whom loves her in his manner and according to his capabilities.

The story is full of hardships and is richly dramatic. It ends with melodrama and partial tragedy, arising out of Bella's commonplace past—commonplace in the eyes of others, but never commonplace to the protagonist, as the author skilfully makes clear. It is not, however, in the least depressing. One can read this book as a social study, as a plain novel, or as both, with satisfaction.

Notes on a Margin

By Doris Peel

HOT of heart
cold of mind—
this a goblin's
gift you'll find.

Happy he
gracely blessed—
with blaze in brain
ice in breast.

* * *

Bold the bloom
sprung from tomb,
and from pyre
bright the fire.

Out from sealed
sightliest yield:
proudest plumed—
he consumed.