

The Climate Remains the Same

THE ENCHANTRESS. And Other Stories. By H. E. Bates. 206 pp. Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown. \$4.

By NIGEL DENNIS

THE American poet, Conrad Aiken, trying to put the spirit of Britain in a nutshell, cited the example of two dear old English ladies watching lambs frisking in a spring meadow. After cooing and burbling over the sweetness of the little creatures, one of the old sentimentalists suddenly got down to brass tacks: "And wouldn't they be good with mint sauce?"

This is a very true example of old England, torn between sweetness and greed, and many English writers have tried to delineate the peculiar quality that results from the combination. Yet it is a very difficult quality to catch. The sentimental side of it is fit only for comedy, while the earthy side

("She slapped her hands on the tight broad front of her body, running them over the great curves of her hips and down the taut bulge of her thighs," etc.)—well, they may be curves and they may be bulgy, but it's a rare Briton who can make such hips seem flesh. Even D. H. Lawrence couldn't really do it—most of what went on in the dark, one feels, was just whistling.

H. E. Bates works this peculiarly English field with a hand that has become deft with long practice, but the ground seems to defy his strongest efforts to get really deep into it. The scenery is all there—the flowers, the meadows, the winding streams and willows—but they lie on his work like pretty paints; and his English por-

traits, be their fronts ever so broad, are rather lustless little manikins. Thus, "eyes of brilliant hyacinth blue and ribbonless blonde hair"; "Aunt Nancy * * * all red and shining like a radish"; "The grace of her bare legs, the skin a fine pure cream under the brown-purple skirt." It is no use: they are simply not characters with a genuine hunger for spring lamb; they are mere chocolate bunnies.

There are a dozen new stories in this collection, and they will please and amuse the many whose heartstrings respond to kindly tugs. Most of them are about disappointed love and thwarted dreams, and occasionally the scene switches from the English countryside to Polynesia or Bermuda. But the climate is always the same, and however fevered the imagination, the temperature remains normal.

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