

## Fiction

### V FOR VIGOUR

H. E. BATES: *The Fabulous Mrs. V.* 192pp. Michael Joseph. 16s.

Mr. Bates's latest collection of twelve stories demonstrates that both his vigour and unique ability to evoke, visually, his settings and characters remain undiminished despite an enormous output. Indeed, at times, the sheer amount of energy displayed in these tales almost equals that of the leading characters in "A Party for the Girls", none of whom is under sixty, while the eldest and most glamorous, Miss La Rue, is over eighty-five. The atmosphere of this story—which might easily have been macabre—reflects the gaiety of the volume as a whole, though more sombre hints are conveyed by "The Diamond Hair Pin" (suicide? Lesbianism? Perhaps even murder) and the motivation of the narrator in the title-story seems to be inspired by an impartial desire for revenge on all concerned: on his friend, for his superior athletic prowess (though this feeling may be unconscious); on Mrs. V for being attractive; and on her daughter, with whom the friend quixotically elopes, for being plain and downtrodden. ("I never understood her then and I doubt very much if I shall ever understand her now," he concludes after contemplating Mrs. V in her final defeat; "only time can tell", but that is unlikely since the events he relates took place more than thirty-five years ago; also it is doubtful whether the adjective "fabulous" was used in its modern sense during the 1920s).

A spirit of savage comedy—the obverse of the author's attitude towards the Larkins—predominates in "A Nice Friendly Atmosphere", the rollicking exposé of a pseudo-intellectual family who serve mutton disguised as Spanish wild boar for luncheon and drink dandelion beer with it; but the fun is mitigated for the reader by the fact that the Barclays, pretentious and horrid though they may be, are about to be fleeced by the old hag whom they have trusted. For the rest, a twelve-year-old girl flees from her hire-purchase-ridden home to spend a few idyllic, innocent days with a tramp in the woods before the baying of police-dogs in the distance causes him to send her back; a couple of typists spend a pseudo-Edwardian Sunday at a riverside restaurant and are left by the possibly epicene young men they encounter to pay the bill; and a boy of eighteen, prone to amorous reverie, is coldly doused by reality in a fruiterer's shop. There is also an oblique account of the meeting between two middle-aged ex-R.A.F. men and a sullen French girl (of whom one of them might be the father) which provides a poignant footnote to the stories of Flying Officer X, and two sketches of Tahitian life which, one hopes, are a foretaste of many more to come.