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Henry Williamson—Farmer

By H. E. BATES

FOR some years Mr. Henry Williamson lived in Devon. Four years ago he became, rather less by accident and rather more by a natural perversity than I think he would have us believe, the owner of a 200-acre farm in Norfolk. The farm was derelict, ill-drained, neglected, thistle-choked, its productivity long since heavily diminished. Advice from every side implored an inexperienced author not to touch it at any price. This advice was rejected, and Mr. Williamson became the owner of a farm which needed recapitalizing, reconstructing, and revitalizing in every conceivable way. Here, and elsewhere, one gets the impression that if the sum of his friends' advice had been to buy instead of to reject the farm, he would have done nothing more adventurous than go fishing.

Contempt for style

This perversity, a natural love of being "agin the Government," is responsible throughout his new book, *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (Faber and Faber, 10s. 6d.), for some interesting contradictions. On page 50, for instance, Mr. Williamson rejects with contempt the idea of writing a reasonably careful literary style. "Why write prose at all?" he says, and certainly nine-tenths of this book is pretty shoddy stuff. But six lines later he is working the literary prose-machine like the very devil in order to create a necessary effect, and produces what is very nearly a rhymed couplet—"A change to see the modest little sunsets of the east after the great ocean-flaring, sky-colours of the west."

Again, the public is fairly used to being bludgeoned by authors for its execrable standards of taste, but it will be a change for the public to get a glimpse, via Mr. Williamson, of the strange standards of authors in satisfying that taste. What will the public, which is to be seen throughout this book coughing up good money for articles written to pay next week's wages, think of these two extracts?—"It was the dead-line for my weekly nature article, and I wrote it in, the A.B.C. tea-shop"; and again, "I told him I had to broadcast in the Children's Hour from Bristol the next afternoon, and hadn't written my talk yet. . . . I arrived half an hour before the broadcast, finished

writing it half a minute before going on the air." This may be, of course, Mr. Williamson's natural method of production, but he must not mind, I think, if I suspect a certain connection between that method and the confusion and hastiness of the present book.

The state of farming

If we turn to the story of the farm, what has Mr. Williamson to offer? If he had kept to the story it would have been excellent. When he describes the farm, the market, the diddycos at the sale, the ploughing and reaping, the seasons and the country folk, he proves that the poet in him, given a chance, can still express himself with keen energy and beauty. But the state of English agriculture is, on Mr. Williamson's showing, rotten; the public are mugs; the politicians are international scoundrels; English farming is sacrificed on the altar of international finance. To end this desperate state of affairs we need a desperate remedy. What shall it be? It is natural that we should look to Mr. Williamson, for twenty years an author, for four a farmer, for the suggestion of a constructive answer. But none comes. Little is offered but vague references to "the party," angry talk about Argentine beef interests and English decadence, fine phrases about "the age of sunlight and authentic pedigree."

Perhaps certain deleted chapters, of which Mr. Williamson speaks, were more constructive. Generally the disease that racks the agricultural body is much reviled, but no cure suggested. Farmers, as the late Neville Chamberlain pointed out with unfortunate candour at Kettering, are the inevitable sacrifices to foreign investments. Mr. Williamson rightly deploras such political cynicism, and yet omits to point out that those same farmers, as much as any other class, enthusiastically assisted Mr. Chamberlain and his supporters to power.

In this way *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* succeeds in being a markedly contradictory affair: energetic but slipshod, well-intentioned but ill-tempered, argumentative but irrational, racy but lazy, readable but skip-farm. And the hero is, of course, not the farm, or agriculture, or England old and new, but Mr. Williamson himself.

and saw the little lady into her carriage. As the train moved out she was glad, yes, really glad that she had given that note, thinking of his father killed in the war, and of a possible mother left to be helped, and small brothers and sisters. Yes, she was glad, for, after all, the suitcases were not so very heavy, and as for going without lunch, had she not had a good breakfast; eggs, scones, and things? Oh, yes, she was glad.

Yet, as the train got nearer and nearer to London, she felt smaller and smaller and more depressed. There was only eightpence, after all, in her purse. Suppose that it was tenpence round to Paddington, or even ninepence. She did not know. It might be ninepence, and the very possibility of it, hardening gradually into a probability, made her feel cold and wretched. As the suburbs of London were reached her misery was really acute. She hung her umbrella on one arm by its frightful wooden crook, and felt inclined to cry. No, she would not cry; it was only a cold coming on again from the draught. However, the lozenges would still be in her coat pocket. Down went her hand into the right pocket—nothing there. Then she tried the left one, fished up the little sticky bag—and something else: a piece of paper.

MISS HEATON held it in her hand and stared at it—a brown-and-white Treasury note. Now when had she put it there? Her mind went back to different times when she had worn that coat out shopping, and she tried to recollect any moment of having had ten shillings change. When, when had she put it there, and how was it she could not remember the occasion? Perhaps it was there three months ago when her last salary had been paid, and no account kept of it. Still no clear remembrance came, and she put the money into her purse. What a godsend, what a godsend, she thought, no longer feeling hungry, cold, wretched. How lovely it would be now to have a porter at the station, how easy to get change at the bookstall for the cab. And, above all, how thankful she was that she had given way to that generous impulse and let William have the other note rather than nothing at all.

Warmed by the recollection, cheered by the thought that the gift had been made, Miss Heaton leant thankfully back and the tired look faded away from her eyes. The day was fine, the seat was comfortable, and, had she heard it, the wheels of the train that now carried her, and had once carried many hundreds of wounded to be nursed in English wards, those wheels rumbled out gently.

True the saying, true the moral
That the sage of Scripture uttered,
Cast thy bread upon the waters,