

BOOKING OFFICE

Mixed Bag



R. H. E. BATES seems to me to do two things particularly well. He can express in simple and dramatic language the inner tragedies of the incoherent, and he can present background with exceptional clarity, so that, our senses sharpened by his lean, objective prose, we are made vividly aware of the exact and significant appearance of a dawn in India or the ancient cluttered muddle of a farmyard. At times he is almost more interested in places than people, and then his characters can be no more than emotional types; but when these two special powers are equally married we get something of great beauty, as in "The Little Farm," the first short story in his new collection, *Colonel Julian*.

This typical Bates story is about a small farmer, cheated and lonely, whose life blossoms wonderfully with the arrival of a young housekeeper who becomes his mistress. He is shattered when, without warning, she leaves him. The remoteness of the farm, the man's touching surprise that he can be made happy, his hopeless inability to convey his feelings, his dumb misery at the end, all these are used brilliantly by Mr. Bates to achieve the kind of commentary on life at which he excels. The title-story, describing a brief wartime friendship between a very old soldier and a fighter-pilot is a reminder of how well—better than any

other writer—"Flying Officer X" penetrated the casual façade of the Air Force.

I like him least in comedy. There are two of his Uncle Silas series here which I think are only mechanically funny. In satire he can also be uncertain, as in his study of lachrymose nostalgia, "The Flag." But many of these stories reflect an acute knowledge of the human heart. Most of them are dark in outlook, but, as one reads, the curious fact emerges that all but one—and that is called "A Christmas Song"—are drenched in sun. The heat of summer and all the possible varieties of burning and blinding sunlight exercise over Mr. Bates a fascination that, a little monotonously, colours the book.

From America come very different tales, *The Injustice Collectors*. Mr. Louis Auchincloss demonstrates in eight long stories the theory that certain people by their mental attitudes unconsciously attract unhappiness or disaster. He is a very civilized writer, though capable of being ruthless; he sees his characters as part of a complicated pattern of society which he takes to bits without prejudice and with critical irony. In his stories is none of the violence or the sentimentality disguised as toughness into which too many of his country's authors have been led; instead there is detachment and a wit that does not exclude compassion. In a brief compass he builds up such a complete file about his unfortunates that we seem to know them