

FOREWORD

THIS story, *The Hessian Prisoner*, is typical of Mr. Bates' talent. Not the most striking of the thirty-four short stories he has published, it is characteristic of his art's charm and emotional atmosphere.

Jasper and Clara Bird, these peasant farmers and their simple outlook, are made very real to us from the first few strokes, and Johann the Hessian prisoner, the good-natured young giant, holds our sympathy no less. Beyond question Mr. Bates has the secret of creating living men and women and disclosing the springs of their character. As an example I may cite the sharp little man, Smack, in the story *Alexander*, who in a few pages captivates the boy with his diverting flow of lies; and the wizened old lady, the owner of the wonderful orchard of mellowing fruit, is no less a personality. In this story, *Alexander*, the author attains, I think, his high-water mark. It is an idyll seductive in its atmospheric beauty, in the feeling it breathes of the waxing and waning of the long August day, of the slow passage of

the tranquil hours, of the boy's instantaneous recognition of the mesmeric spell cast upon him by the girl in the little stone house near the wood. *Alexander* is a beautiful achievement, one worthy to be mentioned with Tchehov's story *The Steppe*. Mr. Arnold Bennett, who has acutely divined its affinity to that masterpiece, has remarked that "it is not in the same class." Well, for its depth of content, creative breadth and mysterious diversity *The Steppe* is of course unique. It is of interest to note here that Mr. Bates' sensitiveness to literary influences, like his sensitiveness to beauty, is far acuter than that of his critics. Nobody, I believe, detected what influences were at work, respectively, in his first novel, *The Two Sisters*, in the title story *Day's End*, and in *The Child*. That nobody should have divined these subtle influences is a tribute to the purity of his feeling and the delicacy of his craftsmanship. Certain of Mr. Bates' stories show the influence of Tchehov, but in certain others, if there be an influence, so perfectly has it been assimilated that I cannot detect it. Take, for example, *The Fuel Gatherers*, which in its tenderness, calm, and understanding of these village women, shows most penetrating

insight in an author of twenty-three. This sketch is matched, if not surpassed, by its companion, *Harvest*, in which a mother's family burdens and her coming fruition, are presented with nature's force and subtlety. *Harvest* is a speaking example of Mr. Bates' intuitive understanding of woman, as wife, mother, daughter, and spinster, of her moods and emotional reactions, a root understanding which blossoms in *The Baker's Wife*, *Nina*, *The Schoolmistress*, *Blossoms*, and *The Mother*, which last sketch shows the intimacy of genius. There is genius, also, to my mind in *The Idiot* where the gulf between observation and imagination is bridged intuitively. An extreme sensitiveness to impressions of all kinds, but especially to fine shades of feeling and tone seems to be our author's birthright. Thus the shrinking sensitiveness of a small child to the terror of a storm, and old age's apprehensions of on-stealing death are finely recorded in *Fear*, while the heart-sinking loneliness of a boy in new, harsh surroundings, on his first journey from home, is rendered perfectly in *The Barge*. Both in this sketch and in *Fishing*, the watery atmosphere of a river, with all its accompanying smells and sights and

sounds, is conveyed to a miracle. I will instance another sketch, *The Shepherd*, as showing the rare blending of earth's moods with human moods seen through landscape. Hardy's example in his picture of Egdon Heath is often cited; but it is curious that when a young author achieves such a memorable, beautiful piece as *The Barge* or *The Shepherd*, its quality is not perceived till pointed out to the grateful.

Edward Garnett.