

THE HOUSE WITH THE APRICOT

Mr. H. E. Bates is a mainly lyrical short-story writer, whose especial gift it is that his stories seem to flower into being as naturally as any of his beloved wayside blooms. These three in *THE HOUSE WITH THE APRICOT* AND *TWO OTHER TALES* (Golden Cockerel Press, edition limited to 300 signed copies, 21s. net) share alike that simple spontaneity; but the title-story at least would appear to derive something of its unforced beauty and power to impress from a deeper and more fundamental impulse than the purely lyrical. Here we have plain that tragic sense of fatality, of human beauty caught inescapably in toils of disillusion, which we may see as underlying all of Mr. Bates's work that is not merely episodic and superficial.

In the actual description of the House with the Apricot and of its two odd occupants, mad, gambling father and guardian daughter, her bloom of youth fading, faded, "living out her life until he died and all her chance for love and even her desire for it had gone," there is, with all its happy skill and richness, nothing very new. Mr. Bates has done this kind of thing before, and perhaps done it as well. We even feel, with the narrator, "it was an old story, and what had at first seemed strange and mysterious was now just common." The encounter with the drunken Mr. Abel Skinner strikes a stranger note, one almost perhaps too much of oddity; but it is only with his subsequent appearance, brushed and dressed into something "between an auctioneer's clerk who drank on the quiet and a Nonconformist deacon," that one begins to appreciate the depth and inwardness of the tragic comedy one is called to witness, and to understand that Angela's escape can be at best but from prison to prison, that there is in fact no escape for her at all. Nor is there for the gipsy girl in "The Pink Cart," in whom, even as she coughed her life away, "I would catch for an instant the flash of her own spirit and the spirit of her race before sickness and poverty had degraded them, wild, careless, proud, passionate-blooded." The situations are really identical, and each story illuminates the other. "The Man from Jamaica," the slightest and least interesting of these three tales, may seem to suggest escape, but really it underlines the other two in finding it only in fiction, in fantasy.