

BEFORE THE STORM

H. E. BATES: *The Feast of July*.
Michael Joseph. 10s. 6d.

Mr. H. E. Bates can achieve a quality of lyrical intensity that few contemporary novelists can match. At the same time there is at the back of his work a sense of impending doom which makes the periods of happiness he describes so well seem only to be a reprieve. It may be a brilliant summer's day and one of idyllic happiness—to Mr. Bates fine weather and human happiness are always closely connected—but at the same time one is conscious of the storm that is coming, and it is almost a relief when the clouds pass and it finally breaks.

His new novel is a love-story, set in a small country town towards the end of the last century, although there is little in the way of unfamiliar detail to date it back from our own age. Here Bella arrives looking for her lost lover, ill with the fatigue of her journey and the after-effects of a miscarriage. A family of shoemakers shelters and succours her. Each of the three sons has something to give towards her recovery, and it is clearly with one of them that her chance of happiness in the future lies. It is with Con, the eldest, that she eventually finds fulfilment, but on the eve of their engagement, the night of the

Fest of July—still apparently celebrated throughout the Midlands—they unfortunately meet her former and faithless lover, and in an uncontrollable rage Con kills him. With an experienced and skilled hand Mr. Bates telescopes the sequel, but Bella is left with the recollection of her happiness intact and with confidence in its continuation.

As always Mr. Bates writes with extreme sensitivity to the changing moods of the countryside. "Spring came too early, false with bursts of blue warmth in March, a bright glinting on brooks and river and a few first spare primroses in copses southward of the town after late falls of snow"—the seasonal background to Bella's story is throughout acutely observed and vividly described. Mr. Bates's characters, too, are well drawn, but the very facility with which he spins his story puts a gloss between his perception and ours that prevents us from becoming deeply concerned in their fate. Also one is inclined to suspect that Mr. Bates is more interested in moods than in people, and this, too, removes some of the reality of his characters. In spite of this the skill with which he tells a good story and the carefully polished flow of his style give unfailing pleasure.

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