

The Larkins' Cup of Tea

THE DARLING BUDS OF MAY. By
H. E. Bates. 219 pp. Boston: At-
lantic-Little, Brown. \$3.75.

By JAMES STERN

WHOWER said that the English are a glum race, that they take their pleasures sadly, that the Welfare State and the burden of taxation have turned the tight little island into a place of bitterness, apathy

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and gloom? Certainly not H. E. Bates.

In this racy, sexy, rollicking tale, tossed off, one feels, during a month of glorious spring weather among the hop fields and blossoming orchards of what surely must be Kent, Mr. Bates assures his readers that if people like the newly rich Larkins don't live literally like royalty it's only because they are vociferously happy living the way they do.

For "Pop" Larkin on his farm everything was "perfick."

What's more, and more important, Pop was determined that all visitors, including the horsey and impoverished local gentry, should share with his family the "perfick" things of life; above all the colossal meals cooked by Ma (whose "great continent" of a body was about to produce a seventh child), and Pop's drinks which he produced from a monster cocktail cabinet known as the "Spanish galleon." ("A Guide to Better Drinking" was the only book Pop had ever read.) If there's anyone in this country wanting to know what one English family can digest between dawn and dusk of a single day, let him read "The Darling Buds of May."

The young visiting tax-collector, Mr. Charlton, is as staggered by the Larkins' appetite and lavish way of living as Pop is to learn that he should have filled up a form to pay the taxes on his past year's income. Fill up a form? "I got no time for forms," roars Pop. "Gawd Awmighty, I got pigs to feed. Turkeys to feed. Hens to feed. Kids to feed." Mr. Charlton is about to express his very serious view of the situation when he sees, floating across the immediate Larkin hen-and-pigscape, a very different kind of form in the Larkins' 18-year-old daughter, Mariette.

With Mariette's silken legs brushing against his under the



Painting by Alexander King. Courtesy Chase Gallery.

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tea-table, all the Larkin children stuffing themselves with pineapple and thick Jersey cream, Ma cooking three geese for supper and Pop pouring whisky into his tea ("relieves the wind, frees the kidneys and opens the bowels"), the stunned, underfed Mr. Charlton is soon, and in all senses of the word, undone.

Only occasionally in the crowded, dreamlike days to come, during the strawberry and hop picking season, does the bemused tax-collector remember his mission. These Cockney hop-pickers, for instance, they ought to be paying taxes on what they earn! Taxes, cries Pop, "dammit, if they was taxed, they wouldn't come. Then you wouldn't have no beer!"

The logic of this argument Mr. Charlton finds as crushing to his last shreds of reasoning as the reader should find this prolific writer's latest creation—or should we say a perfect piece of entertainment?