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H. E. BATES

NEXT MONTH'S CHOICE (TO BE PUBLISHED ON SATURDAY, OCTOBER 1ST) IS A BOOK BY AN EXCEPTIONAL YOUNG ENGLISH AUTHOR



HERE is extracted a portion of Bates's preface to the volume of his short stories which is the October Readers' Union selection. Specially compiled for Readers' Union, "Bates's Choice" will not be made available to the general public for one year. It is a volume of 416 pages, large crown 8vo, beautifully printed at The Alden Press, Oxford. None of the stories included appears in *THIRTY TALES*, the current volume of H. E. Bates's short stories in "The Traveller's Library".

AS I WRITE this preface it seems to me that the short story, which I regard as being not by any means the least of this generation's contributions to literature, stands a fair chance, as near as matters, of being starved out of existence. In England, at the moment, there is not one reputable magazine devoted entirely to the short story, and the periodicals which take any interest in it at all can be numbered on the fingers of one hand. And outside one or two periodicals the rates paid for short stories are pitiful. There is no magazine in this country to compare, for standards of taste and remuneration, with *THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY*, *HARPERS*, *SCRIBNERS* or *ESQUIRE* in America. Here in England, by a nice irony, it is the newspapers which have saved the short story from complete oblivion and many short story writers from starvation. I say by a nice irony deliberately, for though newspapers have the lowest possible standards of taste regarding rape, homosexuality, murder, perversion, cruelty, suicide, divorce, public indecency and sexual behaviour in general so long as such things are related in terms of fact, they have the severest and most impeccable standards of taste when these same things are related in terms of fiction. Don't ask me why. I treasure greatly a letter of refusal from the editor of a leading newspaper: "Sorry. Don't you know that Mrs Grundy is co-editor of every English newspaper?" Nor is this true exclusively of newspapers. I could name half-a-dozen English magazines where Mrs Grundy

appears to have a seat on the editorial board.

The existence of the short story seems to depend largely therefore on its survival in volume form: in anthologies and in volumes such as this. That it is the most fascinating of all prose forms I myself have never had any doubt. Its lack of appeal to a wide public completely defeats me. Its flexibility, almost unlimited range of subject and sympathy, and its very brevity, make it as perfectly suited to the expression and mood of this age as the heroic couplet was to the age of Pope. To my mind it is in every way a finer means of expression of our age of unrest, disbelief and distrust than either the novel or poetry. For that reason alone, in spite of petticoat editors and a prejudiced public, I have no doubt as to its future. As we know it, it is still an art in its infancy.

Of my own stories there is nothing to say in explanation for the simple reason that I hope, and think, they do not need explanation. Those who are interested will be able, from these thirty stories, to see quite plainly what forces have influenced me. They can work out, if they so care, the stages of my development, from *THE EASTER BLESSING* to *THE MILL*. But they are not asked to do that. They are similarly not asked to accept a philosophy, a point of view, a creed, a moral, a sermon on good or evil. The best I can hope is that they will read these stories with something of the spirit in which they were written: for pleasure, and out of a passionate interest in human lives.