

An Indomitable Woman

THE FALLOW LAND. By H. E. Bates. 327 pp. New York: Robert O. Ballou. \$2.50.

NOTHING could be more different than this book, in atmosphere and setting at least, from Mr. Bates's earlier "Charlotte's Row," a story of life in the slums of an industrial town. In "The Fallow Land," however, he has succeeded in drawing the same spiritual beauty from sordid surroundings. The character of Deborah, though cramped in by narrow horizons and surrounded for the most part by dreary and inferior natures, stands out only the more vigorously and nobly in her struggle to make something of the land she has almost accidentally acquired, and her unselfish and almost impersonal determination is skillfully made to gain by contrast with the feeble slackness of her husband and son. Through Deborah the author makes it possible for us to see the land as the farmer sees it, yet through the eyes of a person to whom, though precious, it is strange; for Deborah by upbringing was no farmer, and her passionate interest in the land only arose when she bore sons and saw no other means of supporting them.

She was a servant girl—in fact, the only servant—in the house of

an invalid and half-crazed old lady when she first met Jeff Mortimer at a country fair and was horrified by his extravagance at the coconut-shies and merry-go-rounds. Their courtship followed a laconic, unemotional course, until one Winter's day when Jeff's mother suddenly collapsed and died, and it seemed necessary to both of them that Jeff should marry at once so that there might be a woman at the farm. Mrs. Mortimer had been no miser, but her whole life had been centred in Jeff and she had pinched and scraped every penny for his sake; some months after the birth of her first child, David, Deborah discovered that her husband's mother had hidden away the incredible sum of 150 golden sovereigns. When Jeff got hold of the money he became lazier than ever and began to drink, and when Benjamin, the second son, was about six years old, he left the farm in a towering rage and did not reappear. Her father-in-law died at about the same time and Deborah was left alone to cope with the fast-decaying little farm. It was then that her shrewd character, full of determination and sound common sense, asserted itself; and after a few years of her good management the farm was prospering again. The boys grew up with a strong resemblance to their parents—Benjamin, big and sturdy, with his father's idleness and fiery temper; David, who had always been the weak one, with more of his mother's sensitiveness and shrewdness. Then came the war; Benjamin, who had joined up eagerly at the first opportunity, came through it unscathed; David, shamed into going against his principles by the bullying of the family of the girl he loved, was killed. As Deborah grew older she saw her accomplishment grow with her up

to a certain point, then wither away again as Benjamin came back from the war with no taste for farming, nor indeed for anything except mechanism, drink and vulgarity. The return of Jeff proved the final emotional stroke which was too much for Deborah to bear.

The fallow land was a field near the house, barren enough, which was in a way symbolical of Deborah's life and of all the personages in it. The Mortimers, father and son, continually laid plans for cultivating it but failed to get started; Deborah, who hated sloppiness and indecision, by infinite toil wrung good crops from it; it was the first thing which drew her attention when she began to take an active interest in the farm, and the last thing she thought of as she realized, dying, that Jeff was letting it slide again.

Nor is the book altogether such a tragic affair as it may seem from this description. Mr. Bates's characters, especially his women, are extraordinarily lively and accurate, even down to the subtle distinction between Mrs. Mortimer, who respected Deborah because she was "in service," and her sister, who kept a public house and despised her for the same reason. Deborah herself, kind, clever, patient and strong-willed, with "no nonsense about her," is a memorable person. But perhaps the best thing about the book is the lovely prose in which it is written, matter-of-fact and yet half poetic, in which each word and phrase is so unobtrusively right as to be almost unnoticeable.