

Four hats

THE FOUR BEAUTIES

BY H. E. BATES

(Michael Joseph 25s)

Man of many hats, H. E. Bates sports four assorted ones here. This quartet of novellas falls into the pastoral-comical-tragical category, on the sound principle that something will probably please somebody at least some of the time.

Pastoral bits are, in fact, everywhere, saturating the stories with countryside sights, noises, aromas; foghorns booming across the dykes: "great orange towers of beeches flaming above

the naked chalk in the last shafts of afternoon sun". They are potent moodsetters, but as backdrops to trivial action they loom too large, like Wagner with *The Archers*.

The comical quarter seems long and desperately unfunny: Aunt Leonora, Anglo-German friendship, mistaken identity, lots of fruity mispronunciations. The remaining three tales are varyingly tragical. Even Mr. Bates appears to find the going rather draggy in "The Four Beauties", a doomladen novelettish piece, swamped in thumping Homeric epithets. But he seems very taken with his imagery, so he tends to repeat it.

Altogether stronger meat, "The White Wind" depicts life and

death, elephantiasis and typhoid in the not-so-balmy South Seas. This tale seems constricted by limitations of space and form, bursting at the seams with stifling passions. Best by a long chalk is "The Simple Life". Written with a fine economy, it charts a woman's temporary emergence from gin-haze and self-pity in response to a youth's innocent anxiety to please. From their first nervous awareness of one another until the payoff, which is very touching, the delicate cadences in the telling are just right.

JUDITH FRANKEL