

CREATURES OF DESTINY

H. E. BATES: *Death of a Huntsman*. Michael Joseph. 12s. 6d.

Mr. Bates's stories come in all sizes; he is as practised and proficient a writer of the full-length novel as of the genuinely short short-story. But of all the various fictional forms the one which most seems to suit him is the *conte*, the long short-story or short novel, a form that is regrettably out of fashion at the moment. The particular advantages of the *conte* for a writer of Mr. Bates's temperament and type are that it gives him enough space to develop the poetic and generally pastoral, atmosphere on which much of the effect of his writing depends, and yet not enough to become monotonous without the change of tune or of tone which a longer work demands, but which Mr. Bates does not always provide.

The first two of these four stories show Mr. Bates at his best. In both one is conscious of the strong strain of fatalism that runs through much of his work. His characters are puppets, not in the sense that they are lifeless or without individuality, but that one is conscious all the time that someone else is pulling the strings on which they dance. This is particularly so in the first story, which gives its name to the book. As soon as one can size up the situation, that of a middle-aged businessman with a drunken and disinterested wife falling in love with the daughter of an old but still dangerous flame,

one can sense the course along which it will develop. Yet the feeling that one knows what is going to happen does not on this occasion detract from the effect of the story but if anything adds to the poignancy of the most unlikely, most unsuitable, but entirely credible love-affair which Mr. Bates describes with convincing sensitivity.

"Death of a Huntsman" has something of the inexorable march of classic tragedy. In "Night Run to the West" he equally expertly develops a casual encounter between a night lorry-driver and an insomniac housewife into a fundamental struggle for a man to keep his independence and self-respect.

The two remaining stories, even though the writing continues to give pleasure, are not so satisfying, chiefly, it would seem, through faults in characterization.

Mr. Bates gives to the solitary shipping-clerk in "Summer in Salandar," who suddenly finds the sultry solitude of the island invaded by a beautiful but distraught girl seeking escape from an unhappy marriage, the cantankerous, cliché character of an old man of sixty-five, and only when it is too late to readjust oneself does one find out that in fact he is twenty-six.

Nor, like many other male writers before him, is he at all convincing in the role of a young girl, the part he has chosen to play in "The Queen of Spain Fritillary."