

THE NATURE OF LOVE

THREE SHORT NOVELS

by

H. E. BATES



Dulcima

page 9

**The
Grass God**

page 101

**The
Delicate Nature**

page 195

Dulcima

I

SHE was a short girl, thick in the back, with stout legs covered by brownish cotton stockings and flat feet by big sloppy shoes. Her hands were large and coarse and her straight dark hair hung down over her solid cheek-bones in uncombed strands. In twenty-seven years she had never had much time, as she remembered it, to bother with her hair.

Every afternoon she pushed an old hoodless pram, with a baby in it, up the hillside, through high woods of beeches, under greening crags of chalk, to where the road ended by Parker's farm. The woods were so large that there were always new-blown branches of beechwood lying on the slopes of dry copper leaves and she always loaded the pram with them, so that finally the baby lay almost buried under a crooked roof of boughs. When she pushed the pram up the road she thrust her head forward, making the big solid legs dig backwards and gain their power from the slope of the hill.

When she went down the hill she thrust her legs forward, straining the front of her body outward, so that she could hold the load from running away. Sometimes after storms the woods were filled with a wreckage of broken branches and she felt greedy about it and piled the pram so high with them that she could hardly hold the weight of it back. Then she ran down the hill, pounding her thick legs on the road with lumbering stabs that filled the long high woods with clapping echoes.

She was very conscious of her legs; she had always been terribly aware of their ugliness. She was aware too of the coarseness of her hands. But she felt that she could have borne even the ugliness of the big squabby hands and the flabbiness of a face in which the lips were too thick and the eyes slightly out of proportion and the hair too coarse to bother with if only her legs had been tolerable. Every girl wanted legs with some kind of shapeliness. There were things you could do to a plain or even an ugly face to make it more tolerable, even to make it attractive or striking or beautiful, and you could always put smooth new gloves on your hands. But she felt there was nothing you could do to change legs that were only lumps of fat hideously knotted with raised blue veins. They were something

horrible, like a deformity, an affliction, you could not disguise.

She felt too that there were reasons why her legs had grown like that. She had never known the time when there was not a baby in the pram. She had never known the time when she was not slopping up the hill in her big flat shoes, pushing the pram, covering it with firewood, then pushing it down again. There seemed never to have been a time when she did not stand at the copper, pounding at clothes, or at the sink, washing dishes for a dozen people. She knew that these were the things that thickened and coarsened and twisted your legs into shapelessness, tying them with slaty and hideous veins. Standing and lugging and standing and pushing and standing on her own weight all day had destroyed the things she wanted to be most beautiful.

Her mother was a hollow-faced whining woman with meagre breasts that were like empty purses except when they filled briefly and fed another child. Her face was yellow with a haunted look. It was the look of someone trying to remember something—a pleasant thing or a comforting thing or the reason for something or the details of a lost intention. She seemed to be trying to recapture

something. And over the year she had expressed the impossibility of recapture by giving her children proud and fancy names. They were called Rowena and Chalice and Spenser, and then Clarissa and Angela and Cassandra and Abigail, and even Magnolia and Sharon, two who had died.

The name of the eldest, the girl who pushed the pram, was Dulcima. Her father called her Dulce. It was her mother's way, in preservation of successive dreams, to call the children by their full names, with a kind of round, doting, stupid grandeur. But for her father it was Dulce. It was Abb and Cass and Clar and Ange and even Ro and Spen. Her father, a man with cheeks fissured dark by long hours in brick kilns, had no time for names, for doting or for fanciful things. Work at the kiln seemed, after years, to have burnt the juices out of him, so that he was dry of kindness. Shallow grey eyes were cemented into a head that had no colour. Even the diminutives of the names he used were not soft in effect. He rapped them out hard and chipped, like chisel blows.

'Drop that, Abb, else I'll git the strap. Stoppit, Cass—any more lip and I'll mark you. I'll mark you, by God I will.'

He was proud, as he said, to have them at a word.

‘I want shoes,’ she would say. ‘I’m walking wet-foot now. I bin walking wet-foot for a week. Every day.’

‘You’ll git shoes, you’ll git shoes. I ain’t made o’ shoes, am I?’

‘Git shoes with what? They had a pair at the jumble and I hadn’t a mite to bless myself with. Git shoes with what?’

‘Dulcima, don’t you urge your father. Don’t you urge him like that—’

‘Let him git me a pair o’ shoes then. Let him stop Dulcing me all day long. Dulce this, Dulce that, where’s Dulce? Let him stop Dulcing me and git me a pair o’ shoes.’

‘You’ll git shoes, time enough, you’ll git shoes.’

‘Time enough for what?—I’ll git shoes but it won’t be here. I’ll Dulce out o’ here one o’ these days. I’ll Dulceout and git myself some shoes. I ain’t a dog walking on my bare feet. I ain’t a dog—I won’t be treated like a dog.’

Like a dog, every afternoon, she pushed the pram through the beechwoods, up the hill. Like her mother, as she pressed forward on thick ugly legs, she became preoccupied with successive dreams: a dream of shoes, or a decent dress, a dream of some way to make her legs less hideous, of a time when she might wear white gloves on her hands.

II

Every Tuesday and Friday, market days, Parker came up the hill, driving a mud-stained open Ford with a trailer.

She did not think of this as an extraordinary thing. It happened so regularly and so often that she hardly noticed it. Always on those days, about the same time, she heard the clash of gears as Parker turned the corner and began to climb the hill through the beeches. She heard the echoed rattle of the worn-out Ford clashing up into the high cover of branches. She saw the car coming out of the lower wood-land like a drugged and slightly crazy buffalo, nosing from side to side, lurching in heavy curves so that sometimes she had to pull the pram into the chalk verge until it was safely past her.

Every day too she saw the thin drunk-grey face of Parker as it went past without looking at her. In winter mud from the Ford splashed her cotton stockings and as spring came on white chalk dust was beaten up into her face. She showed no sign that these

things irritated her. Sometimes she stood holding a broken branch in her hand, staring thoughtfully after Parker, watching him until, at last, the car lurched and disappeared through the gate of the farm.

On a day in late April Parker came up the hill faster than usual. She heard the car roaring up the road like an ancient and rickety train. She had just time to pull the pram into the verge before Parker went past her and the Ford, bouncing, bit the snake fence thirty yards beyond.

At first she did not move. She stood gripping the handle of the pram and watching Parker trying to get out of the car. She saw the drunk-grey face straining across the seats; the hands groping along the edges of the dusty car body for support.

She watched for some moments longer and then Parker fell out of the car. He hit the roadside face first and then turned over convulsively and lay still. At the same moment i the car engine coughed in a back-fire that was like a pistol-shot and the sound woke the baby, so that it began to cry. The sound of its crying startled her more than the crash had done and suddenly she found herself running forward, shouting:

‘Mr Parker! Mr Parker! Are you all right, Mr Parker? What ever has happened?’

After some moments Parker opened his eyes, saw her and tried to stand up. She watched him for some seconds shuddering on the raised edge of grass. Then he fell down on his face again. His black trilby hat had already fallen off and now she picked it up. It was covered with a white bloom of chalk dust and she began to brush it with her hands.

The inner rim of the hat, when she turned it over, seemed to be stuffed with paper: as if it were too big for the small skinny head of Parker, who had padded it to the right size.

Then she saw that this paper was not merely paper. It was in the form of many pound notes, neatly folded and packed tight inside the hat, under the greasy leather band.

‘I’ll get you home, Mr Parker,’ she said. ‘Mr Parker, I’ll get you home.’

For some few seconds she was torn between the problem of Parker, the hat and the crying baby. She solved it by leaving Parker where he was and taking the hat to the pram. Then she pushed the pram to the farm-gate, rocking it up and down so that the baby stopped its crying. Finally she pushed the hat behind the pillow and then came back to where Parker was.

He was still dazed as she lifted him up with stout arms and, in the same solid way

as she pushed the pram up and down the hill, carried him to the house. His fall had left a long streak of blood on his left cheek and she said:

‘Mr Parker, you might have killed yourself,’ but Parker did not answer.

After she had dumped Parker into the big horse-hair chair in the kitchen, her first thought was for the hat. She wheeled the pram to the kitchen door and then took out the hat and put it on the kitchen table.

‘I’ll git you a cuppa tea, Mr Parker,’ she said. ‘I’ll wash that blood off your face and git you a cuppa tea and you’ll feel better.’

Again Parker did not answer. Nor did he seem to notice her movements about the kitchen as she filled the kettle, lighted the oil stove and got ready to bathe his face and make the tea. Cups and plates that Parker had used in the morning or the day before or even the day before that stood about the kitchen in odd places, on chairs, on the mantelshelf, on window-ledges, in a sink filled with greasy stew-pans.

‘You let yourself git into a rare mess,’ she said and began to bathe his face.

Parker was a man of fifty-five and she had always thought of him, when she had thought of him at all, as being older than he was. Her first close look at his face did not change her mind. It was a face of small bone

structure, narrow, withthin lips and sparse receding rabbit-coloured hair. A little frown of pained anxiety about something brought the small grey eyes rather close together.

Some time after she had washed his face Parker sat up. With stupefied eyes he looked glassily past her. He sat staring in this way until she brought him tea. She had the sense to bring it to him without a saucer and he sat with the cup grasped in both hands, staring, letting the tea fume up into his washed grey face without a word.

‘Feel any better?’ she said. ‘You might have got yourself killed,’ but again Parker did not answer.

While he drank the tea, she looked at the floor, splashed with grey hen-droppings, with mud and mud-straw from the yard and with old stray feathers; at the crockery lying on mantelpiece and window-sill and chairs; and at the colourless skeins of lace that had once been curtains; and she said:

‘Don’t nobody come in and give you a clean-up once in a while?’

He seemed to shake his head; and suddenly she felt in a clumsy way sorry for him: drunk, womanless, lost, unable to answer her.

‘Well, it’s time somebody did.’ She pulled at her stockings that had slipped slightly down in concertina ruckles over her stout

legs, but Parker did not notice them. 'If I git time tomorrow I'll come in and give you a bit of sweep-up. Not afore you want it either.'

Parker seemed to nod his head, still as if not seeing her properly, and after some moments she said, 'You take care of yourself, Mr Parker, you'll be killing yourself one o'these days,' and then she lumbered out into the yard and pushed the baby down the hill.

III

When she came up the hill on the following afternoon it was with the thought of Parker, rather than the hat, uppermost in her mind. She did not conceive the hat as an important thing. Spring was coming across the valley and puffs of blossom, like tranquil smoke, rose everywhere about the pastures below the hill. Under a sharp blue sky the beeches were brilliant masses of almost transparent lace-like leaf and it puzzled her, almost irked her, that a man could live as Parker lived in the spring time: womanless, unswept, curtains unwashed, the old crust of winter still clinging everywhere like a frowsy mould.