

SEVEN TALES AND ALEXANDER

"Alexander," the principal item in Mr. H. E. Bates's volume *SEVEN TALES AND ALEXANDER* (Scholartis Press, 7s. 6d. net), is a tale too, but somewhat longer than the rest. It is a charming account of a wonderful day in the life of a small boy—the day when he drove in his Uncle Bishop's cart to pick the apples and pears of the queer little old lady who was very deaf and couldn't do sums and was horrified when Uncle Bishop struck a match: a day when from sunrise to dark life was a faëry, peopled by new and admirable beings, a fat woman called Cilla, a magnificent liar called Smack, and a girl who climbed into a sloc-tree and filled his heart with joy. A child's power of wonder, his intense absorption, the ethereality of his sudden, unconfessed affections are things which Mr. Bates realizes and reproduces in his somewhat slow and measured prose. His thoughts turn to children in other sketches in this book. "The Barber" is a happy memory of a country character who shaved yokels gravely, but played all kinds of pranks when left alone with two little boys who wanted their hair cut. "The Peach Tree" and "The King Who Lived on Air" are fantastic fables, with gossamer morals, to which children would be, perhaps, the most suitable and the least critical listeners.

But the finest tale of all, simply called "The Child," is not written for children. It is written in the grey shadow of adult mortality, but is beautiful none the less. A little child is sitting in a house by the sea, looking enchantedly through a window of variously coloured panes of glass at adult bathers in the sea. At last, in ecstasy, she sheds her clothes and runs down to do the wonderful thing she has seen.

She ran suddenly forward to where the dancing shapes, the fat and thin, the more athletic and the wary, were rolling their old, white, misshapen, ill-kept, would-be seductive and repulsive bodies like hoary seals in the sun. As she ran forward she made little jubilant noises and waved her hands. She came to within twenty feet of the sea. Suddenly all the fat women and the thin men stood up in the water. They stared, gasped, and dashed the water from their flabby eyes. The sea-drops glistened and dripped from their bedraggled limbs. And suddenly, as if ashamed of something, they all strode forward in the water, waving their fat and thin and pallid arms, gesticulating forbiddingly, making noises of horror and shame. "Go back! Go back!" they shouted to the naked child, "Go back!"

"The Tinker's Donkey" and "Lanko's White Mare" are also successful studies in the comic and the pathetic.