

Worlds in Collision

THE WATERCRESS GIRL. And Other Stories. By H. E. Bates. Drawings by Hazel Pope. 222 pp. Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown. \$3.75.

By ALICE S. MORRIS

THE English short-story writer and novelist, H. E. Bates, has demonstrated in the past that his apprehension of the state of being a child is delicate, penetrating and filled with light. Specifically, in the thirteen stories in his new book, he illuminates the shadowy, indeterminate territory where the reality of the child is confronted by, collides with—or uncannily anticipates—the reality of the adult. Under Mr. Bates' scrutiny, these two realities are revealed as so disparate, of so inherently different an order, that communication between them is fragmentary; except in rare, almost mystical instances of pure divination.

A précis of plots, in the case of "The Watercress Girl" stories, can barely approach the heart of the matter, for the most successful turn on merely transitory situations, or isolated moments of experience. The only story with a plot in the conventional sense—"A Great Day for Bonzo," in which a dramatic conflict between grown-ups is counterpointed by the peripheral involvement of three children—wears an uncharacteristic air of contrivance that invalidates its flashes of literary truth.

Elsewhere, Mr. Bates matches his craft to his vision with sometimes incandescent effect. The first story, "The Cowslip Field," sets the mood. On a summer's day, gathering cowslips with a squat, bespectacled countrywoman, a young boy momentarily discovers in this familiar, homely figure an un-

familiar, mysterious and lovely being unsuspected by the surface-skimming eyes of the world. ("Slowly, like an unrolling blind, the massive coil of her hair fell down across her neck and shoulders and back, until it reached her waist. He had never seen hair so long, or so much of it, and he stared at it with wide eyes as it uncoiled itself, black and shining against the golden cowslip field.")

A little girl who prefers playing house to games of war, in a foretaste of adult betrayal, loses her male playmate to a rival more enthusiastic and able at sudden ambush and playing dead ("Death and the Cherry Tree"). Accompanying his father on a visit to a remote, impecunious aunt of whom he has never even heard, a boy has a glimpse into one of the sad outlands of family life and, from the cryptic circumlocutions of their conversation, divines an intimation of the truth ("The Far Distant Journey"). Two boys, setting out to find where the world begins, find instead a man who has transformed the necessity for wearing a glass eye into a source of gaiety, and an absolute virtue ("Source of the World").

Mr. Bates' gossamer-textured prose and his lyric passion for the natural world—that often makes his pages *mille-fleurs* tapestries of cowslips, watercresses, birds and butterflies—combine to give his tales a golden sense of eternal summer, only shattered here and there by adumbrations from the wintry purlieus of maturity. Especially in the stories enumerated above, and in a haunting, nostalgic narrative titled "The Pemberton Thrush," Mr. Bates opens an effective and affecting route straight to the heart of childhood: its innocent joys, its uncorrupted vision and its inevitable capitulation to time.

Miss Morris combines writing criticism with a literary editorship at Harper's Bazaar.



H. E. Bates.
"The Watercress Girl."