

## BUTTERCUPS AND BINDWEED

H. E. BATES: *The Watercress Girl*. 222pp. Michael Joseph. 13s. 6d.  
JOHN CHEEVER: *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill*. 185pp. Gollancz. 15s.

*The Watercress Girl* is Mr. Bates at his best. This author is never, of course, a fumbler. No one writing in English to-day can set a scene more swiftly; no one brings more artfulness and assurance to the job of making words and rhythms kindle the reader's five senses. He can dazzle the page with the blossoming jacaranda, and he can catch the demurer loveliness of a buttercup field smiling up at an English summer sky.

In this collection he sticks to the buttercups. The Northamptonshire countryside of forty years ago, the hedgerows grey with dust from the flint roads, the stone walls of the houses tawny in the sunlight, are the things which still stir him most deeply. He writes here of children on long summer days unbedevilled by motor traffic, and chiefly of one child, himself. His grandfather takes him in a trap on visits to aunts and uncles and cousins; he listens to grown-up conversations and grown-up wrangles, and obliquely we are made aware of tensions and tragedies in that adult world which is at once stiflingly on top of him and infinitely remote. Sometimes he wanders away on his own, and a gypsy girl, not much older than he is, teaches him how to cry cresses for sale, and he arranges to meet her at five o'clock one morning soon in Evesford mar-

ket, and practise his accomplishment. Sometimes—as in the most ambitious story here, "A Great Day for Bonzo"—he is caught up in the activities of a little crowd. They become involved in another dimly apprehended grown-up near-tragedy. The scherzo of the small trotting feet and the appassionato rumbles from the adult world are beautifully blended, and the vast timelessness of a young child's summer day has rarely been more deftly recaptured.

Mr. John Cheever presents us with eight precision jobs reprinted from the *New Yorker*. They are skilful, sad concoctions, but there is a mechanical, robot-like quality about them as well as much crackle and glitter. There is the impression of an extremely lively talent not being given its head, of a writer fenced in too narrowly by a formula and willing to concede too much for the sake of a breathless, killing finish ("O Youth and Beauty!" is a good example of this). Cheever the unbuttoned Wapshot chronicler is much to be preferred to Cheever the rueful contemplator of New York outer-suburbia, and the well-upholstered, centrally heated unhappiness of wedded lives in those parts. "The Country Husband," however, is a fine story. It spreads its wings and rises buoyantly. The others purr expertly down a long, smooth runway, but somehow never get off the ground.