Condition, Conduct, Consequence

"The Enchantress and Other Stories," by H. E. Bates *(Atlantic-Little, Brown. 206 pp. $4), play variations on the theme of human understanding vs. moral judgment. Irving H. Buchen is a member of the English faculty at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey.*

By Irving H. Buchen

IN THE Thirties, when H. E. Bates was an angry young Englishman, he proclaimed in a brief essay on Hardy and Conrad: "Morality is virtually a fraud, since there is really no stabilized coinage of morality at all but only the elemental currency of human action and re-action, only human conduct and its consequences." Bates was then fighting for a fiction that would display moral judgments not as something obviously superior to, but as something imperceptibly imbedded in the human condition. Throughout his writing career this has remained his central artistic aim. Happily, this new collection of short stories has the same distinguished focus.

Perhaps the title story, "The Enchantress," best suggests the extent to which the vital relationship between human conduct and morality is contingent upon the reader's own awareness. The "enchantress," Bertha Jackson, born and raised in the slums, marries a fairly wealthy man old enough to be her grandfather. We rapidly conclude that the old man is a fool and that Bertha is a gold-digger. Bates evidently knows his readers well, for he has other characters come to the same hasty, cynical conclusion. Having set the trap, he springs it, catching and embarrassing them and us with this simple observation: "When a man of seventy marries a girl of seventeen . . . it never seems to occur to anyone that all that has possessed him is a firm dose of taste, enterprise and common sense." And, far from being a social climber, Bertha makes her husband happy, and others after him, by her enchanting gift of selfless adoration. Or, as Bates neatly puts it, "Bertha never dispossessed anybody of anything."

At least three other stories, "Lost Ball," "The Spring Hat," and "An Island Princess," also deal with the losses in understanding that often follow upon mechanical and narrowing moral judgments. In fact, all twelve tales in this volume are variations on this theme. Appropriately, those that achieve an unforgettable poignancy have as their central characters individuals who live on the periphery of life. Clara Corbett of "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal" is such a character. A butcher's wife, she enjoys a momentary liberation of soul before she sinks back into the drudgery of delivering neatly wrapped cuts of meat in an old van. Then there is Thelma in the story of the same name, a bedroom maid whose life is measured out, not in coffee spoons, but in cans of hot shaving water which she doles out every morning to lonely traveling salesmen. She falls in love with one, but when he fails to return she spends the rest of her life giving herself to other salesmen, imagining all the time that it is her beau who is really making love to her.

Significantly, these and the other stories in this volume are moving precisely because they are not pointed with any heavy-handed moralism. In fact, the key to Bates's achievement is his lightness of touch. His characters never crowd or crush the reader. They emerge casually, considerately, as if starting off a long distance away and slowly walking toward us. Their problems and conflicts never thunder or crackle noisily; they are treated by Bates with quiet respect, almost with reverence. And yet, our final impression is of an artistic world surprisingly powerful, rich, and full. Equally as important, we find that Bates has granted the same extended breadth to our understanding of human conduct and its moral consequences.

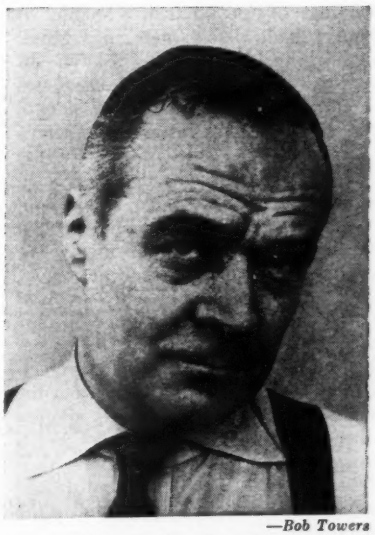
A Case of Mistaken Identity

"A Man in a Mirror," by Richard Llewellyn *(Doubleday. 432 pp. $5.75), demonstrates the seemingly unbridgeable gulf of misunderstanding that separates white settlers and native tribesmen in Africa. Novelist Peter Abrahams, himself born in South Africa, is the author of "Wild Conquest."*

By Peter Abrahams

I SUPPOSE it is true to say that in a sense all literature is sociology; but all sociology is not literature. This was the dominant thought in my mind after reading Richard Llewellyn's latest novel, and there was something saddening about it.

Very many years ago I read another piece of sociology by Mr. Llewellyn, and it was a thing of beauty on the growing up of a young boy in the green valleys of his beloved Wales. There was a singing poetry about that story that lifted it far above sociology and made it stir the heart of a black boy in Africa. "A Man in a Mirror," on the other hand, is competent, well-handled sociology, written with a greater stylistic mastery than "How Green Was My Valley," but lacking in the inner poetry that makes literature.



—*Bob Towers*

Richard Llewellyn—". . . well-handled sociology."

The story is of Nterenke of the Masai, known as James Teren to the white folk, who, with the exception of one semi-villainous American, are all called Europeans whether they were born in Europe or not (this is the language of the white settler in Africa). The plot is very simple. Nterenke is