The Greatest People in the World.

By

FLYING OFFICER X. *Cape.* 2s.

It is an open secret that this little book of stories about Bomber Command is the work of Mr. H. E. Bates, and it shows great intelligence and imagination on the part of someone in authority that he should have been given the opportunity of writing them. For he is not an obvious choice, nor would one, I think, have supposed from reading his other stories that he would produce these moving, slangy, human portraits which give a picture of the bomber pilot as near to the truth as we from the outside are likely to get. Mr. Bates was popularly known as a "country" writer, but his country was always on the fringes of suburban poverty; a country infected with corrugated iron and rotting fences and seedy acres of barren soil: a country where people lurked somewhere just above the moron level, overblown, cringing, brutal or scared: where the climate was heavy with sex, temper and thunderstorms.

Nerves and the inarticulate, these might be taken as a link with the aerodrome, and certainly Mr. Bates brings to his new territory a developed skill at what might be called dumb dialogue or the art of the monosyllabic. He brings, of course, too, his sharp observation, his power of fixing the atmosphere with a few exactly placed words, and, paramountly, his sense of design. In short what a pleasure after the spate of amateurs—good though in their way one or two of them have been—what a pleasure to watch the professional using his instruments precisely and exactly, knowing to a thousandth part of an inch what

can and what cannot be done, when to go on and when, above all, to stop, what the medium can perfectly do and what lies outside its scope.

The Greatest People in the World contains nine short stories about life on a Stirling station, each of them centred round one pilot. In the smallest compass Mr. Bates succeeds in creating the atmosphere of the place and the occasion, the individual character and the variety of backgrounds from which the pilots derive. Each is a sharp limited impression, and yet between them they imply the whole of the widely scattered levels and points from which these young men have come together. For his title does not refer to the pilots themselves, but to the people who bred them, in labourers' cottages, in Australian farms, in Texas, in suburban houses, "the same simple people, the same humble faithful eternal people, giving always and giving everything: the greatest people in the world," as one of them says of his own mother and father.

If it is his art to make this wider implication, his immense skill is best shown in the vivid evocation of atmosphere, steady and steeled in the long enduring hours of driving towards the flak and the lights, or in bringing back a machine so crippled that it dissolves in pieces as it touches down on the runway, tense, nervous, windy in the Mess before or after a raid, expressive with the brittle slang:

> I went back into the ante-room at last and, for a moment, in the bright and now crowded room, I could not believe my eyes. Rubbing his cold hands together, his eyes remote and chilled, his sweater hanging loose below his battle dress, the pilot of K for Kitty was standing by the fireplace. There was a cross of flesh-pink plastic bandage on his forehead, and I knew that something had happened.
>
> "Hallo," I said.
>
> "Hallo," he said. "You're back."
>
> For a minute I didn't say anything else. I wanted to shake his hand and tell him I was glad he was back. I knew that if he had been in a train wreck or a car crash I should have shaken his hand and told him that I was glad. Now somebody had shot him up, and all I said was:
>
> "When did you get in?"
>
> "About an hour ago."
>
> "Everything O.K.?"
>
> "Wrapped her up."
>
> "Well," I said. "Just like that?"
>
> "Just like that," he said.
>
> I looked at his eyes. They were bleared and wet and excited. He had made a crash landing; he was safe; he was almost the best pilot in the outfit.
>
> "Anyone see me come in?" he said.
>
> "Saw you from control," someone said.
>
> "How did it look?"
>
> "Perfect until the bloody airscrew fell off."
>
> Everyone laughed; as if airscrews falling off were a great joke.
>
> Nobody said anything about anybody being lucky to be back, but only:
>
> "Have an argument?"
>
> "Flak blew bloody great bit out of the wing. The inter-comm. went and then both turrets."
>
> "Many fighters?"
>
> "Ten at a time."
>
> "Get one?"
>
> "One certain. Just dissolved. One probable."
>
> "Good show. What about the ships?"
>
> "I think we pranged them."
>
> "Good show," we said, "Good show."

One would say, so exactly has Mr. Bates caught the authentic accent, so pervaded is the whole little book with the sharp odour and flavour of the real thing, that he had made this, as much as his other neurotic country, his own world. But that he is not so perfectly at home in it is betrayed by his too easily at times slipping into the professional tricks. It may be the result of popularising, of course, but the ending of at least two of the stories is much too slick. Then again understatement is certainly the genuine air of the R.A.F., but understatement is also the sentimental trap set for all post-Hemingway story writing, and Mr. Bates sometimes falls into it. Perhaps these stories will not add much to Mr. Bates's reputation in later years, but may in the end count for him as the start of a wider range and a warmer humanity. In any case they give the outsider the most genuine, because the most intuitively perceived, of all the pictures of a pilot's life. If you want to know what it feels like to be on one of the operational stations from which the Stirlings start out to bomb the Continent, you will get the exact feel of it from these nine short tales.

T. C. WORSLEY

Coucou. Written and illustrated by HÉLÈNE TERRÉ. *Chatto and Windus.* 3*s.* 6*d.*

The commandant of the Fighting French A.T.S. has made a delightful little book for children in which the French and English texts are printed one under the other. It is the story of a little blackamoor girl who enlists as an ambulance-driver in the French Red Cross, comes to England to continue the struggle, is imprisoned as a suspect, and, on her release, joins the Free French. Later, she descends from a parachute in Africa, and rides a camel through the Arc de Triomphe in a liberated Paris. The illustrations, mostly in colour, are as enchanting as the text, and