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STARTING ON ITV
Country Matters
STORIES OF RURAL ROMANCE

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H.E. BATES TALKS ABOUT THE BATES BOOM

ME, MY SHAPE AND FASHION BY ZENA WALKER

THE BIG STARS THIS WEEK
BETTE DAVIS

Back from World War One trudges Albert (Tom Chadbon) in the Country Matters *story,* The Mill, *by* H. E. Bates. *He provides a fleeting glimpse of happiness for Alice, his father's housemaid.*

Country Matters

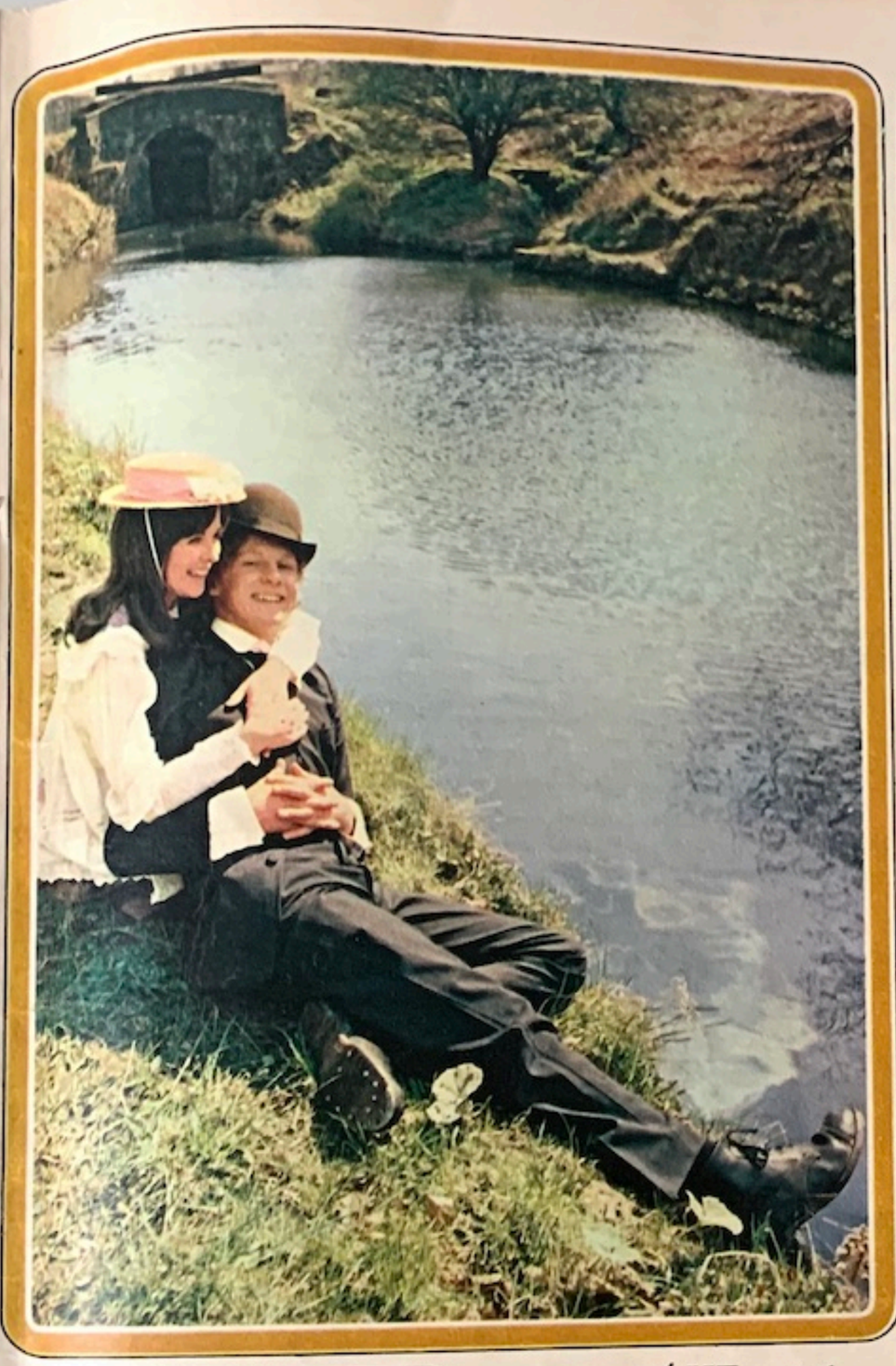
by ALIX COLEMAN

Country Matters, *the TV series of tales about English country life at the turn of the century, is taken from seven short stories by H. E. Bates and six by the late A. E. Coppard. Here, Richard Bates, eldest child of the author, talks about his father; Kit Coppard talks about* his *father, and H. E. Bates talks about himself*

Grandfather H. E. Bates, left, a keen gardener, claims: "I was the original angry young man . . . a very revolutionary spirit. Time softens us all."

WHEN RICHARD BATES remembers how he used to watch cricket on the green outside his father's house (with his father playing and the weather always staying fine) it really wasn't all that long ago: Richard Bates is now in his late 30's. But it is a memory in a continuing tradition. Against all apparent odds, potent recollections of blazing English summers seem to have seeped into the national consciousness for evermore.

Perhaps it is something to do with the evocative work that has come out of English country writers and poets over so many



THE *ecstatic youth, above (Peter Firth) falls for the local post-mistress in Coppard's* The Sullens Sisters – *but the girl around his neck is her younger sister (Clare Sutcliffe) . . . Left and right, Ian McKellen and Prunella Ransome in* Craven Arms, *this week's romantic prank . . .*

years, particularly from two of the best modern practitioners in this pastoral vein, the late A. E. Coppard and the present H. E. Bates.

Richard Bates, a free-lance television producer, tells how his father and mother, when they became engaged, walked for miles and miles through Kent looking for the right place to live. Searching for the ideal spot took months. They found an old granary and converted it in the days before unlikely conversions became fashionable. H. E. Bates has lived there for 41 years. His four children grew up there. Now, at 67, he has 10 grandchildren, whom he much enjoys, and a dream of an English garden, large, green and tamed over the years, lavish with flowers and foliage.

Bates and his wife Madge have always been tremendous gardeners. They used to grow vegetables as well, until the family grew up and left. Now the vegetable garden is full of diversified, contrasted bushes and leaves which, says Bates, were carefully worked out to look haphazard. "It's been going for about six years, and the more mature it gets, the less work it needs. That's nature for you. That's it. The rest is/*continued on page* 12

"My mother was the hub of the family, the meal-ticket"—Kit Coppard

continued/flowers. I can identify any sort of flower until the cows come home. This mauve one comes from the rain forests of Brazil. It's a very nice thing."

These days the granary is a mellow house, the minor impressionist paintings filling its walls, so carefully acquired for a few pounds each after the war, worth a tidy sum. It wasn't always like that. Bates, small, round, sharply blue-eyed, looks like a Mr. Magoo who doesn't miss a thing. He comes from the boot-and-shoe town of Rushton, in Northamptonshire, and was always trying to get out of it. He says that before the war he made very little money and, during the war, none at all.

"My wife stayed at the granary with the four children, all under eight, which wasn't very funny, and I went into the R.A.F. I was the original angry young man, highly impatient, always wanting to switch the world to rights, a very revolutionary spirit. Time softens us all.

"At first I wanted to paint, but I was so bad at it I gave up and decided to do my painting in words. I've been compared with Renoir, which really did please me, because I love Renoir."

Not long ago, H. E. Bates showed his son Richard an account book he'd found from the Thirties. "He wrote reviews for magazines and newspapers for a couple of guineas a time, and that was all we had to live on," said Richard Bates. "We went to the village school until Father wrote three very successful novels – *Fair Stood the Wind for France, The Purple Plain, The Jacaranda Tree*. Then things got better."

H. E. Bates is happy to report that there is more than a bit of a Bates boom on at the moment. "Everyone has gone quite sedately mad, as they say. Four films from my work are made or being made. I think it's an admirable situation, my making a little money without doing any work. The actual business of writing several thousand words at a time is very tiring. All art, whether you're painting or sculpting or whatever, is a physical act. It's no good dreaming fine dreams. You work with your mind and you work physically."

"We were always very much aware that we couldn't make a lot of noise because Father was working," said Richard Bates. "And we never went into his room to see him writing. He'd appear for lunch in what can really only be described as a trance. He tried not to work too much in the afternoons. He has always felt you need the rest of the day to give the mind a chance to recover for the next onslaught. He often likens work to wrestling, saying he has to struggle with an idea and pin it to the floor.

"He has a very even temper. So has my mother. I don't recall them ever having a row. But that doesn't mean Father was an easy man to live with. He certainly has a will of his own. Whatever we did was done the way he wanted it. But that didn't make us angry with him. I suppose living with a man of great sensitivity, a genius, which is what he is after all, there's so much one automatically accepts which must seem strange to others. He certainly needed this family thing very much. He sat on his family nest; I suppose he was almost cocooned by family life.

"There's a love between my father and me which is very strong. On the other hand, communicating with a man like that isn't always easy; he so often seemed to come from another world. But I never felt overshadowed by him. I gave up writing short stories because there's no market for them."

H. E. Bates left school at 14, rejecting a higher education because he wanted to get on and write. A. E. Coppard left school at nine, at first because of some mysterious, undiagnosed illness. He never went back because his father died and, as the eldest child of five, Coppard had to turn breadwinner. Coppard, who died 15 years ago at the age of 79, didn't properly start writing until he was 40, and never made much money from it. At 40, he gave up his safe, book-keeping job in Oxford to live on his own in various tiny Oxfordshire cottages, gradually drifting away from his first wife.

His second wife was Winifred de Kok who, in her time, gained some renown as the BBC TV doctor, and also as the author of books on family planning and child care. She and Coppard had two children, Kit and Julia, and Kit Coppard remembers his father at over 50, looking about 33.

He played football at 50, and bought his last pair of football boots at 55. H. E. Bates, who knew him, remembers that, and Coppard's jet-black hair. Kit Coppard says his father was mountain-walking at the age of 65. He died unexpectedly of post-operation complications.

"My father," said Kit Coppard, "was very much his own man, a solitary. He wasn't a family man in the Bates sense. Sometimes, I guess, I feel that, for him, children were toys in a way, amusing things to have around the house. He was a marvellous story-teller and used to make up comic verses for us. My mother was the hub of the family, the meal-ticket. She had the capacity to earn a reasonable living. He didn't because of his kind of work, which didn't pay. He was well known to writers, particularly in America, but his books never sold. And he wrote very slowly. All his stories were squeezed out, lengthy pregnancies."

Publisher Kit Coppard, who a few years ago adapted three of A. E. Coppard's stories for BBC TV, deeply admires his father's work, but in a clear-eyed way. "I'm very fond of his best tales, and not his second-best. His creative mind expressed itself at unpredictable levels in the stories; his characters are shy of enforcing their own fates.

"He never kept hours; if he wanted to write all night, he did so. And he wrote, I suppose, between 12 and 20 stories which are for me, at any rate, unquestionably on a par with the best of Chekov and of a quality that I can't really compare with any other English short-story writer in the last 100 years.

"He didn't particularly leave us alone as children, but there's a difference between leaving alone in terms of going away and in terms of getting on with work. People working at home can be absent, not just from nine to five, but for weeks on end. He could be fierce. He never struck us but he could shout. He used to have terrible tempers, so we were frightened of him when we were small. But he was a very basic, entertaining guy. We went on walks and holidays together, and to pubs. My father was a man who loved to chat in a pub with anyone who happened to strike some sort of spark in him.

"We moved around a bit. Once we lived out near Marlow in Buckinghamshire, right in the middle of a beechwood for six months, a marvellous place. I wanted to buy it recently, but the wood has been cut down. Then we lived on the Suffolk coast, by the sea, for seven years. In 1939, we moved to Essex and stayed there until his death.

"I don't feel I was very close to him – not as close as my son is to me. There was a kind of biological closeness, but that's one of those things you recognise in retrospect – that and the fact that you were living in the shadow of a fallible human being."

The inspirations of A. E. Coppard and H. E. Bates are rooted in country soil. Coppard, above left, loved the hills and fields of Oxfordshire. Bates belongs to the Kentish earth which supports the garden he loves, above right.