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Why I choose this story

I have always maintained that the short story is to fiction what the lyric is to poetry. Especially is this true of the very short short story, where there is no room for expansion matter, and where, if perfection is to be achieved, every word must do the work of two, and, if at all possible, the work of even more. When these conditions are fulfilled, the result should be a work of delicacy that is also strong; a picture where, as in a master drawing, it is the lines that are left out that tell as much as those that are left in.

There is a phrase in one of Chekhov's letters that continually sticks in my mind. Writing of the work of some minor contemporary of his whose name has long since been forgotten, he said, "I long to rewrite it—lacially." Exactly; it is essential that one should be able to see through this fabric of a story, as through lace or the branches of a well-pruned tree; and it is precisely because I think *Cowslip Field* fulfils these conditions that I have chosen it as one of my favourite stories.

But I have also chosen it for two other reasons. I believe first that I have achieved in it all the colour and atmosphere of a prose poem, and secondly that it succeeds in extracting from the unlikely figure of the ugly little woman taking a small chatterbox of a boy to gather cowslips on a warm spring morning something of singularly touching beauty that lifts the story completely off the ground.

H. E. Bates