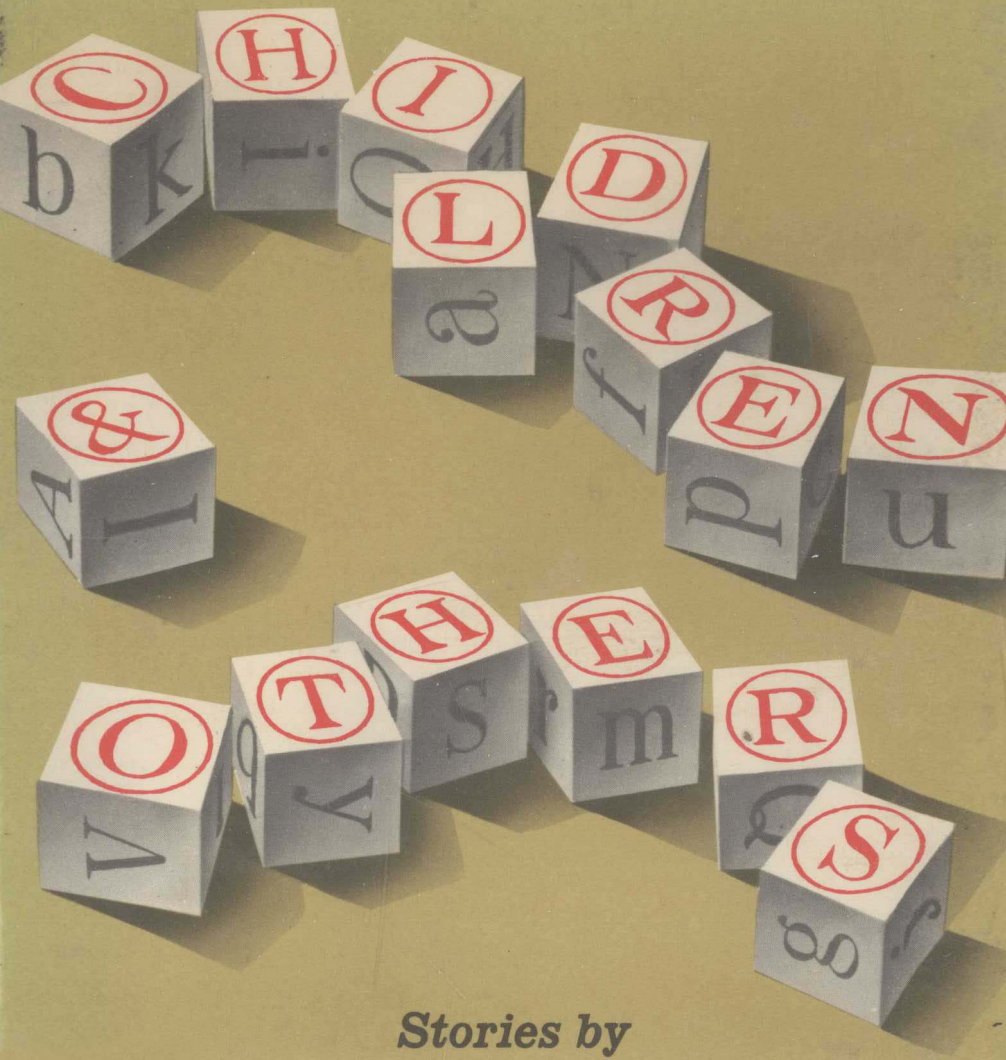

Stories by

James Gould Cozzens

James Gould Cozzens

CHILDREN AND OTHERS

LONGMANS

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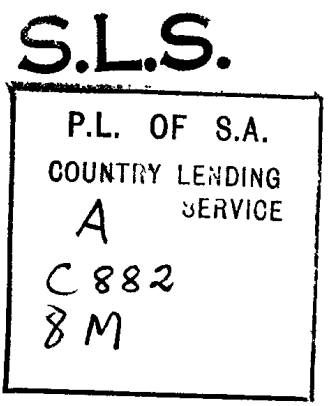

Children and Others

The sixteen short stories and one long story that Mr Cozzens has selected for publication in this volume are, taken singly and together, entertaining, disturbing, enlightening and enduring. They demonstrate the astonishing variety in experience and the vast versatility in style that so conspicuously distinguish his writing.

Mr Cozzens has divided his book into five sections. The first and second, embracing ten stories in all, deal with adult recollections of youthful experiences. Two stories about the American Civil War make up the next section. Four stories follow under the heading 'Love and Kisses' and concern the relationship between men and women. The concluding section, 'Eyes to See,' is again an adult recollection of an earlier time. Fifteen of these stories have been published in periodicals over several decades; one story and the long story, the last written only recently, are here published for the first time.

James Gould Cozzens is the author of nine novels, including the Pulitzer Prize winner GUARD OF HONOUR and more recently, BY LOVE POSSESSED.

Books by James Gould Cozzens

S.S. SAN PEDRO
1931

THE LAST ADAM
1933

CASTAWAY
1934

MEN AND BRETHREN
1936

ASK ME TOMORROW
1940

THE JUST AND THE UNJUST
1942

GUARD OF HONOR
1948

BY LOVE POSSESSED
1957

CHILDREN AND OTHERS
1964

CONTENTS

III
War Between the States

IV
Love and Kisses

V
Eyes to See

PART ONE

CHILD'S PLAY

King Midas Has Ass's Ears

The first time I ever saw Mr. Savage he was in a boat. I was very young. I could not have been more than seven: I may have been six. On the landing at Allen's I sat fishing in the shallow water for sunfish. While I fished I had been watching a boat which was rowed in a quick, powerful way ever since it put out from the landing over on the point. The rower proved to be unknown to me; but after he had stepped out on our landing and tied up he said hello, so I said hello. Then he asked me what my name was and I told him. He remained standing there, looking down at me a moment. He was a tall, loose-limbed man with a fine head of thick gray hair worn rather long. His big-featured face had a rugged, much tanned look. Sweat from his vigorous rowing still shone on his forehead. I saw that he was eying the three or four small fish lying dead or dying beside me on the planks. In an offhand way he said, "What are you going to do with those, John?"

"Oh, nothing," I answered, for there is nothing to do with sunfish.

"Well," he said, "why not just leave them in the lake, then?"

I stared up at him, dumfounded; but he said no more. He simply smiled cordially and walked on along the landing.

How good a composer Mr. Savage was I shall never really know. Today he seems to be little heard of or regarded; yet I can remember a time when people with pretensions to musical tast

were apt to have something by Frederick Savage on the piano rack. It was the kind of music with no picture on the cover, but only some ornamental words like "In the Pine Woods," or "Lake Waters," or "To a Scarlet Tanager"; and underneath, in fancy letters, his name. Unfortunately I can hardly tell one note from another; so I know all this not because I was ever interested in music. I know it because—as I got older—eight or nine, that is—whenever I found myself in a room with a piano I looked for compositions by Mr. Savage. If I discovered any, I generally managed to remark that I knew the composer. I daresay I hoped to give the impression that Mr. Savage and I were intimate friends.

This was not quite the case. Mr. Savage had a lodge or large bungalow—it was his own, not one of Allen's—on the point. He called it, perhaps a little too appropriately, "Singing Pines." During the summer, musicians came to visit him there; and when this happened he would invite a few people from Allen's over in the evening. Once or twice I was allowed to stay up and come too. The almost painful silence in which everyone sat, hushed and reverent, while some usually odd-looking and often funny-acting person performed a long time on a piano or violin, or sang in a deafening chesty voice, impressed me a great deal. Afterward, walking home through the dark pines, my mother would tell me that I ought always to remember the occasion, for I had had the privilege of hearing so-and-so, or so-and-so, in private recital.

I remember perfectly the long low-lighted room with the polished piano. On the walls, covered with some kind of grass matting, were many frail, postured Japanese pictures. I can still see the intent listeners—my father motionless with a severe expression of patient interest; Laura Willis's aunt, old Mrs. Beazley, with closed eyes and wrinkled, be-ringed hands resting on the head of her ebony cane; Laura herself, sitting beside my mother, for whom she felt, I think, one of those sentimental schoolgirl attachments. In a rapt, pretty, perhaps slightly absurd way, Laura used to copy quickly my mother's aesthetic reactions. I remember, too, details of the walk back with lanterns through the deep, still, Maine night; but,

alas, I have forgotten the artists' famous names, and of what they played or sang, I recall only that it was very tiresome.

At Allen's in those days everything was simple. You did your washing in a basin, and if you wanted more water than the pitcherful brought by the maid who appeared in the morning to clean up the bungalows you went and got it yourself. If the evening was cold and you wanted more logs than the wood basket held, you went and got these. People did these things cheerfully. They often observed what a pleasure it was not to have a lot of fuss and servants underfoot. For meals, the guests walked up from the pine grove by the lake across long meadows to the farmhouse, which had a screened and awninged dining room built on in the form of a wing. When it rained this was not very pleasant, but nobody said so. Instead they exclaimed over the excellence of the simple food. They also told each other what a nice person Mr. Allen was; and, in effect, how nice they were themselves, since the very simplicity of Allen's was said to have little attraction for undesirable people—even in the after-all-unthinkable event that Mr. Allen would ever consent to receive any.

There was not a great deal to do. There were no parties and no dancing. I don't remember seeing cards played. Though everybody knew everybody else and spoke cordially on meeting, people were intimate with only a few of their fellow guests—those they had always known at home, or those they had seen for many seasons at Allen's, and so come imperceptibly to regard as acquaintances of long standing. Most of the men, like my father, were not able to get away for the whole summer. As soon as they arrived they put on old clothes and went out and fished all day for bass; or, rowed by a guide, trolled for pickerel. Sometimes there were small picnics on an island in the lake. In the morning my mother usually took the pillow cover—afterward to be filled with dried pine needles—which she was preparing, or some embroidery, called in either case her "work," and went to sit with Mrs. Beazley, whose lameness made it hard for her to get around. I can see now that it was very

prim, though in a cheerful way; and, even then, old-fashioned, like something in a book by Frank L. Stockton, or a drawing of vacation days by one of the illustrators of the *Century Magazine*.

I was not bored. There were a few other children to play with; but I had an only child's advantage of not needing playmates. In those days all the mornings were fine. By Allen's landing, the flat-bottomed boats, tied in a row, bumped and jostled each other on brisk little waves. Wind blew cool and strong off the water, up through profound shadows under the pines. Many mornings, when my mother was ready to go over to Mrs. Beazley's, I went with her, in order, as I put it, to help Laura. At the time I found nothing surprising in Laura being always there for me to help. Very likely Laura herself found it natural; but today not many attractive girls of eighteen would put up with a summer at Allen's. For entertainment, Laura could cut out and stitch together patterns of birch bark, provided in the *American Girl's Handy Book*, to make all sorts of useless little receptacles. She could collect ferns and flowers to be pressed and mounted, or she could hunt for birds. For company she had an elderly aunt, and me, a nine-year-old boy.

Laura and I would pass the time until noon. Sparkling light, now poured down vertical, broke up the shadows under the pines. Beyond the white birch trunks the cool lake spread miles away to vague forested shores. At a snail's pace, because of Mrs. Beazley, we walked to the farmhouse for luncheon. The buckboard would be just arriving with the mail. Mr. Allen, a stout, fair-haired, easygoing man, distributed it. He was fond of teasing Laura. "Miss Laura Willis," he would read. "Two, three, four—" he counted, as though appalled, the envelopes addressed to her. Laura would protest that they were just friends, but Mr. Allen insisted that the writers were all young men. "Good gracious!" he would cry, "what are the other girls going to do for beaux?"

Since some of the letters doubtless were from young men, Laura's pretty, naturally warm-colored face turned a remarkable scarlet. "John's my only beau," she would say as firmly as she could. "Aren't you, John?"

I used to think of bow, as in bow and arrow; and of bow, as in a hair ribbon or bowknot, secretly at loss; but it was plain that Laura wanted me to say yes, so I said it. "Well, you look out she doesn't jilt you," Mr. Allen would whisper to me. "She's an awful flirt."

"Why, Mr. Allen—" Laura would wail, thrown into utter, though not entirely unhappy, confusion. "Oh, aren't you terrible! I am not! Am I, John?"

I would say no.

I was, in fact, Laura's only beau; or, at least, the only one right there and able, whenever I had the notion, to monopolize her. I think of those spacious days stretching out breezy and bright, an hour as long as a morning, a morning longer than a week; and it occurs to me that Laura may have found the mornings long, too. When we had eaten, the leisurely afternoon remained. Laura and my mother sometimes walked in the woods. Many afternoons we would go bathing at a curve of coarsely pebbled beach, strewn with sodden black bits of bark and driftwood and an occasional dead perch. Eventually there would be supper. Afterward I often ran out under the summer sunset to get the mallets, so that Laura could play croquet with me on the lawn up by the flagpole. Gradually the delicate clear dusk became night. Walking to the lake you heard whippoorwills in the woods; and, sometimes, far out on the starlit peaceful water, a loon. Everybody went to bed early.

That particular morning I had been hanging around the wagon house after breakfast watching a hired man, named John, too, trying to give a horse named Marmaduke a pill. The pill was about as big as a baseball and obviously I could not leave until I found out whether Marmaduke would finally swallow it, or whether he would bite off the bare arm which this John kept shoving practically to the elbow between his jaws. Marmaduke eventually did take his medicine and was turned out in a field. Well satisfied, I started down toward the lake, and this was how I happened, from the rise behind, to see Laura walking alone on the path along the shore. She had her field glasses slung over her shoulder and I guessed at once that she was looking for birds. The best place for them was

over in a part of the woods beyond the point; and I felt sure that she was going there. Turning, I took, pell-mell, a short cut with which I was familiar across some upper meadows. I arrived at what was called the glen much before she could. There I waited in the moving shadow and sun of the birch thicket, sitting on a stump. I got my breath. I waited a long while, idly absorbed in picking the scab from some healed scratches on my bare leg. Finally, aware of time passing, I had to realize that my guess was wrong. If I wanted to find Laura, I would have to start looking.

The path from the glen went curving through the trees down to the lake where there was an inlet over which had been built an unnecessary rustic bridge. You came on the bridge suddenly; and, deep perhaps in some fantasy of Marmaduke and pills, I continued a step or two toward it before I noticed Mr. Savage standing by the rail. He had his back to me. He was wearing white duck trousers and a white shirt open on his tanned neck. His bushy gray head was bent a little. I pulled up short, staring; for, holding her in his arms, he was kissing Laura.

Encountering Mr. Savage under any circumstances I would not have been at ease. I may have retained from the first meeting on the landing several years before vague feelings that Mr. Savage did not admire or approve of me. Of course I saw him only infrequently; but when my father, who was fond of tennis, came up Mr. Savage regularly played with him on Allen's not very good dirt courts. Mr. Savage played with great violence and agility. What was more, he sometimes prevailed against my father's steady, practiced game and won. I think this was always a surprise to my father, who, however much he respected Mr. Savage's musical accomplishments and reputation, undoubtedly regarded with reservation a man with nothing more serious and important to do than devote his whole life to one of the fine arts. On these occasions, if I were around, I was set to chasing balls. Mr. Savage thanked me pleasantly for my efforts and addressed me by name. It made me feel shy. Though they were cordial, Mr. Savage did not call my father Will; and my father would say, "I make that three all. Yours,

Savage." These things, I suppose, and the solemnity of those late evenings of loud boring music, all moved incoherently in my head while I stood stupefied in the path. I looked at the water. Regaining the use of my muscles, I began to scuff a sandal back and forth, kicking at the pine needles.

Mr. Savage let Laura go instantly, turning sharp around. The two of them stood, still close together, looking at me. I began then to think of the disturbance which had arisen one afternoon last winter when a boy I knew kissed a girl at dancing class. I believe he had done it on a dare, which, like the resulting row, was proof enough that kissing somebody not related to you was no light or everyday undertaking. My impulse, for now I had recovered enough to feel one, was to go away. Before I could do this Mr. Savage said, "Hello, John. Where are you bound for?"

I flushed, balancing on one foot. "I'm not going anywhere," I said finally. I looked at the field glasses in the leather case hung by a strap on his shoulder, and added at random, "Those are Laura's."

"Yes," Mr. Savage said, smiling, "I'm carrying them for her."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I guess I'll go home now."

"We're on the way to my house to have some cocoa," he said in a friendly tone. "Why don't you come along?"

I hesitated. "Oh, all right," I answered reluctantly. A little late, I realized that I was being offered something to eat, not given an order, so I flushed again and said, "Oh. Thank you."

I had not looked directly at Laura, and she had not said anything until now. "John," she said, "why didn't you tell me you wanted to look for birds? You mustn't follow people, you know—"

"I wasn't following anyone," I said, hurt. "I just saw you with the glasses—" Not yet exactly looking at her, I looked enough toward her to see in the corner of my eye the shimmer of sunlight transforming her brown hair to a kind of diffused gold. The fluffy masses of it were bound up with a narrow red ribbon. Her dark wide eyes, generally pleasant and soft, rested on me with apparent indignation. In my injured innocence I did not know what to say.

"It's a good thing you came along," Mr. Savage said. "Mandy made a lot of gingerbread and we need somebody to help eat it up. Do you like gingerbread?"

The way into Mr. Savage's place was through a rustic gate. I had never been there in full daylight before. My ideas of it were formed from the impression of a great, low-lying bulk against the dusk with wide, palely lamp-lit windows; and, later, a vast veranda gilded by the yellow lantern light, and innumerable steep steps down. The morning sun in the clearing made it look not very different from one of Allen's bungalows. Sitting near the kitchen steps was a Negro woman peeling potatoes. Mr. Savage called to her, "Mandy, make some cocoa." He brought us up onto the veranda, which looked of course like any other veranda now. "Here we are," he said. He unslung the glasses' case and put it on a wicker table. "Mustn't forget those," he said to Laura.

The wide settee hung in an iron frame swung sharply as Laura dropped down on it. "I shouldn't be here," she said in an odd, not-clear voice. "You know what people at Allen's are like."

"But you've got a very good chaperon," Mr. Savage said. He sat on the rail, his back toward the blue lake through the trees, his distinguished face and long square musician's hands very brown in contrast to his white clothes. He had an attractive expression, partly humorous, partly serious. "Well, John," he said to me, "how's the fishing these days?"

I gave him an apprehensive look. The truth was, I did not bother to fish for sunfish any more, but my reasons were not humanitarian ones. "Oh, I don't know," I said. Mr. Savage continued to gaze at me expectantly so I said, "They gave Marmaduke a pill. I was there."

"You don't say!" said Mr. Savage. "What was wrong with Marmaduke?"

"Oh, he had worms," I answered with animation. "Shall I tell you what they did to him?"

Laura had been sitting perfectly still, her hands together. She said, "John, that isn't a very pleasant subject to talk about. Come and look at this magazine. It has some funny pictures in it."