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Escape By H. E. BATES

IT IS WELL known, I think, that when a member of the armed forces of this country is captured by an enemy in time of war it is his duty, by all possible and reasonable means, to escape. International law compels him to give the enemy no other information about himself than his name, rank and number; but when he has done this the war, for him, does not end. It begins all over again: to be fought under a new set of rules, in the new set of circumstances, and above all without the comforting assistance of lethal weapons. The captor has the guns, the bullets, the mines, the tear-gas, the searchlights, the spies, the traps, the barbed wire, the dogs and all the countless refinements of mental oppression that make life in prison compounds a special sort of hell. Against these things the captive has only his wit, his resource, his inventiveness, his brains, his endurance, his humour, his luck—if fate allows him any—and perhaps most important of all his mental attitude. This may well be of the kind that makes for heroism. It is much more likely to be of the kind that generates pure cussedness. And pure cussedness, among prisoners of war, is incontestably a weapon of the highest value. It enables the captive to make a devil of a nuisance of himself; it is his most consistent way, even if all others fail, of continuing to harass the enemy.

To these obvious facts the R.A.F., more than any other part of this country's fighting forces during the Second World War,

brought a special attitude of its own. I do not think it was a braver, more ingenious, more determined, or more resourceful attitude than that shown by men in other services. It certainly excelled in pure cussedness; it was also rich in invention and defeatless humour; but above all it was shaped and governed by a special set of circumstances that had never applied to a British fighting force in war-time before. The fall of France in 1940 was in great part responsible for these circumstances, and they are so obvious that it would, for that very reason, be easy to overlook them.

When the continent of Europe became a great mass of enemy-occupied territory with only a few precarious friendly or neutral pockets, leaving Great Britain the only remaining fighting base from which the enemy could be attacked, the R.A.F. found itself in a curious position. It began to fight from its own back door. Whereas in other wars men had gone out from Britain to tackle enemies well out of sight of home, the R.A.F. now found itself having tea in the calm summer air of an English village at four o'clock, fighting in a highly specialised theatre of its own at twenty thousand feet at half-past, and returning to take a telephone call from an inquiring girl-friend at five. A man could be watching Miss Ginger Rogers' enchanting legs on a ciné screen between tea and dinner and then be dead, a prisoner or a confused shot-down wanderer, hundreds of miles away, before bed-time. The necessity of leading such a life of sandwiched peace and frenzy, love and tracer bullets, cool beers on English lawns and stratospheric bloodiness, all under pressure of violent change, had a strange effect of unworldly tautness on the faces of flying men that will never be forgotten by those who knew them well.

The effect of these circumstances on the outlook of R.A.F. fighting men was bound to be highly varied; but presently we were meeting in England with a general type—later to be met with in all other theatres of war—who had solved, at least as

far as onlookers could judge, this curious problem of abnormality in living. He brought to it a refined attitude of understatement, a desire to be casual in a low key that was well expressed in his language. He no longer crashed an aircraft; he pranged or wrapped it up. He no longer fought a gallant action; it was a good show. He no longer died; he bought it. All these things united to become a legendary synonym for acute Britishness. The more closely and harshly war impinged on life the more smoothly, casually and cryptically were the fears of it wrapped up in the veil of language and the cloak of behaviour. War was an embarrassment that simply ought not to be mentioned.

All this was really another expression of an age-old British reluctance to make a fuss about things; but its acutely specialised form among flying men had some highly interesting effects. It made them, when captured, the most reluctant of prisoners; it was suddenly very annoying not to be able to ride home to tea; it was absolutely infuriating to be keeping a date with a Nazi rifle instead of one with a brunette in a café at Canterbury. It also, I think, made the R.A.F. singularly unprepared for capture, just as they were mentally unprepared for subjection anyway. A soldier, blazing away at a local enemy from a fox-hole, must inevitably carry in his mind, however much he hates it, the idea that the situation may suddenly turn very nasty and put him behind barbed wire. The R.A.F. found the same prospect constitutionally difficult to accept: so much so that when I asked the author of this book why flying men, especially bomber pilots, did not go over Germany wearing fully prepared civilian disguise under their flying suits, so that they could begin organised escape immediately on hitting German soil instead of afterwards toiling in tunnels, he remarked that he supposed no R.A.F. man ever had a final and absolute belief that he would be shot down, and that if by some unfortunate accident he were, he would never be captured anyway. One story in this book, the excellent one by Group Captain John

Whitley, is a proof of this as well as its exception. Group Captain Whitley went elaborately prepared. He was one of those who made a will while healthily refusing to accept the idea of death. "He violently rejected," says Mr. Brickhill, "the idea of being captured."

For most captured flying men, however, one simple fact did not become apparent until long afterwards. "We did not grasp until it was too late," one said, "that the moment we hit German soil was the moment for which we were afterwards to work so sweatily, bitterly and ingeniously, and often with such terrible disappointments, to re-achieve." In other words very few men grasped that their arrival on enemy soil was really a state of freedom. It was only from behind the barbed wire of compounds that they looked out and planned with such meticulous care and risk the business of getting back to the very point from which they had started. How meticulously and ingeniously they did plan it all readers of Mr. Brickhill's *The Great Escape*, with its account of masterly systems of pass forging, corruption and blackmailing of guards by sheer daylight cheek, and of Mr. Eric Williams' *The Wooden Horse*, with its astounding piece of schoolboy amateurism turned professional, will already know. They will see it all repeated and confirmed in the eight stories that follow here: stories of escape in the desert, escape through Poland and Russia, escape through the charms of women, escape by canal boat, and perhaps the most horrifying and amazing escape of a war that was probably richer in escape stories than any war that was ever fought—the escape of Squadron Leader McCormac from Malaya to Australia by way of Java. This is an epic of sheer blazing resolution that even *The Wooden Horse* does not excel.

It is not easy to define the common characteristic of these escapes, all by men of the R.A.F., in half a dozen different theatres of war, in circumstances varying from the snows of Polish forests to the scalding dust of the Libyan desert and

from the quaysides of the Baltic to the horrors of jungles in Java. It seems to me to be a quality not readily definable by words like courage, resource or even determination, though determination is perhaps the most powerful common attribute these escapers share. It seems to me to amount, in each case, to something like pure cussedness, to a simple blind, stubborn refusal to be subjected. There is a sort of illogical pigheadedness about it well expressed in the old phrase, "He's dead but he won't lie down." Every man in these stories was quite determined that however dead he might look or even might feel he was damn well not going to lie down; and the bolder and more brazen his determination the better, in most cases, it succeeded. It has been said, and I think with a good deal of truth, that the R.A.F. were the new Elizabethans, fighting and adventuring in air as the great navigators had fought and adventured on the seas. Both had certain qualities in common that are very English, and a kind of highly skilled amateurism—finding its highest expression, of course, in men like T. E. Lawrence, Wingate and Spencer Chapman—is not the least of them. It is that glorious flexibility, the trick of learning the rules and then of learning how to defy them, turn them upside down and finally make them of infinitely greater profit, that is somewhere at the back of all the exploits related in this book and of all the thousands like them that still lie in the files and archives of official records and personal memory.

It has been said that in the event of another war every official directive and instruction on escape will either have to be amended or abandoned altogether. The enemy knows all our tricks; we shall have to think up others. I do not know if the official escape lectures for the R.A.F. contained any reference to the trick so pleasantly played by the men in the episode *The Women Who Took a Hand*; but it is certainly one of the oldest in the world. The trick of *The Wooden Horse* was an extremely old one too; so was the trick of an irrepressible Canadian

navigator friend of mine who charmed his Roman nurse until she looked the other way and he was able to walk serenely out of the hospital and into the Vatican. Possibly, now that the enemy knows all the new tricks, we shall necessarily have to make do with the old ones, which are so often the best. All this is conjecture, and I do not think it will worry us. All that is certain is that as long as there are prisons men will try to escape from them; and that as long as there is an R.A.F. it will bring to the problems of escape the qualities of high resource, pure cussedness and that indefinable, damnably annoying refusal to lie down when dead, of which all the stories in this book are such excellent—and, I think, such exciting—examples.