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An Airman's Ordeal

One of Our Pilots is Safe. By Flight-Lieut. William Simpson. (Hamish Hamilton. 7s. 6d.)

By H. E. BATES

This short book, vivid, moving, and painful, is without much doubt the best piece of writing produced by any operational pilot of the war. Flight-Lieut. Simpson went to France immediately war was declared, flying the now obsolete and then already obsolescent Battles, popularly regarded as short-cut to suicide. He saw little action, was perturbed and depressed by what he saw both of French life and the French forces, and was finally shot down as soon as serious hostilities began. His aircraft then caught fire, and he relates, in a passage of which I have not read the equal in terror and pain, how he was burning alive in the cockpit when he was dragged free by his crew. The subsequent horror of his mutilated face, of his fingers lacerated by fire to the bone, of his scorched body; the appalling mental distress; the fear that he might live only to be blind and helpless; the realisation that youth in him was shattered; the slow recuperation through months of helpless agony; the joy of first being able to read, then walk, then feed himself—his description of all these things forms the emotional basis of a remarkable and terrible book.

But it is a book with other qualities and values. The whole of Flight-Lieut. Simpson's time in hospital, as related here, was spent in France. A hospital, to a man of receptive temperament in an abnormally nervous mental condition brought about by physical catastrophe, offers a peculiar field for observation. To a succession of French hospitals he brings remarkably clear gifts of observation. The doctors, the French officer class, the orderlies, the patients, an Amazonian terror of a nurse—all are drawn with unembittered clarity.

And the most impressive thing about this book is, to me, its lack of bitterness. To be burnt alive and yet not to allow either bitterness or self-pity to confuse the picture of the mental, physical, and spiritual consequences—few of us would have been capable of this. All of us should note it and be humble.

FOR YOUR LIBRARY LIST

RUFUS ISAACS. *By his Son.* (Hutchinson. 15s.)

MY WORLD—AND WELCOME TO IT. *By James Thurber.* (Hamish Hamilton. 7s. 6d.)

STRAIGHT THINKING IN WAR-TIME. *By R. H. Thouless.* (Hodder and Stoughton. 7s. 6d.)