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Many Adventures

*Corporal Jack. By David Scott.
(Faber. 8s. 6d.)*

By H. E. BATES

"Corporal Jack" might be described as a boys' book with a growth of beard. Its early ancestry would seem to be Defoe; its immediate father Masefield. Yet it is also an adult book, and its story of a corporal of the Durham Light Infantry escaping after the collapse of France from Boulogne to Spain is so simple and apparently artless, so credible and so translucently real that it makes the thoughts and doings of an ordinary soldier seem more fascinating and important than all the high heroism of the latest dehydrated communiqué.

Corporal Jack Harvey is as English as Cheddar cheese, as solid, pleasant, and likable. He is the boy who used to clean your plugs at the local garage; the young engineer who played centre-half for the local team and had a trial with Aston Villa; the lad from the village shop who sketched a bit and made good at night school. He is the type you knew, still know, and will always know as part of the solid middle stratum of England. For this reason, I think, but also because of an engaging quality of artful artlessness in the writing, his exploits as he escapes across France into Spain, swimming docks and rivers, hopping German trucks, fighting Spanish guards, and behaving with sense and resource in any difficulty, are both real and captivating. His story creeps forward with the artlessness, the casual emphasis of detail, and the picaresque flavour of Defoe. It can be read and liked by both boys and men for exactly the same reasons that "Robinson Crusoe" is read and liked by boys and men.

Its central figure, lovable, human, ordinary and credible, is, like Crusoe, confronted through misfortune by a series of physical problems which lead to adventure. So you read on about Jack Harvey scheming his way across France, solving the problems of loneliness and escape, as eagerly as you read on about Crusoe solving the problems of loneliness and existence. You read on and, forgiving the apparent naïveté and clumsiness of style and the flatness of character, find yourself caring only that the hero shall survive. He does survive, and, since he is both a man and a symbol, a universal as well as a personal figure, it is, of course, right that he should. For he is part of ourselves.