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# Out of the Inferno

*I BURNED MY FINGERS.* By William Simpson. (Putnam. 18s.)

By H. E. BATES

FIFTEEN years ago William Simpson, then an eager and energetic R.A.F. officer with an "irritatingly high standard of efficiency," possessed the two hands, ten fingers, two eyes, mouth and nose of the normal human being. Today, in his own words, he has "an ugly, fingerless paw for a left hand, and only a few mis-shapen stumps for fingers on my right hand. Where once my face was fresh and smooth, it is now scarred and disfigured. Compared with my fellows I am a freak."

The cause of these catastrophic and terrible changes in William Simpson's appearance was an encounter over France, in 1940, between German light anti-aircraft guns and his already obsolescent aircraft, a Battle. After he had managed to bring his aircraft safely down, somewhere in the Belgian Ardennes, the entire cockpit blew up in flame. Before he could loosen his harness he began to go through the hell, a completely conscious hell, of burning alive.

An act of great gallantry by his observer, Flight-Sergeant Odell, and his air-gunner, Corporal Tomlinson, saved him from final extinction and laid him, a dying torch, in the cool and blessed grass by a Belgian field, where he went through a second and even more

terrifying hell of breathing the evil of his own burning flesh.

Readers of *THE SUNDAY TIMES* may remember how, ten and more years ago, Simpson described the more immediate results of these terrors in "One of our Pilots is Safe" and "The Way of Recovery," two books which seem to me among the most moving and chastening of the war.

He now completes the trilogy of his experiences by re-telling, in part, the first catastrophe and its consequences not only for himself but for a young wife, and also with the fuller, calmer, happier picture of rehabilitation. The book shares with its predecessors a number of admirable qualities. It is, though sardonic in part, amazingly without rancour; it contains, though it inevitably deals in great detail with physical pain and a whole excruciating labyrinth of mental anguish, no hint either of self-pity or inverse glorification. Moreover it tells us, in a surprisingly lucid and personal way, what the earlier books could not tell: the story of Simpson's facial and manual transformation, a sheer miracle, at the hands of Sir Archibald McIndoe at East Grinstead, and of his own spiritual and mental renaissance, his successful passage from a 'disillusioned and impotent wreck to a useful and happy position in society.