

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and
Pollinger Limited. Copyright © Evensford Productions Limited, 1956.

Frenchman with the R.A.F.

THE MOUCHOTTE DIARIES. By René Mouchotte.
(Staples Press. 15s.)

By H. E. BATES

MY abiding impression of Free French Air Force squadrons in war-time England is not merely that of a number of oases so faithfully and intensely French that every airfield dispersal hut, neatly adorned with thick and thrifty rows of onions, lettuces and carrots growing beside paths of white-washed stone, was a painful memorial to French soil, lovingly cared for; it is also one of a grave and sombre atmosphere. By no means defeatist, in fact very much the opposite, it nevertheless persists in a kind of phlegmatic pessimism that, in my experience, the Czechs, Poles and the rest of Europe's disinherited did not share.

My feeling, considerably strengthened by "The Mouchotte Diaries," is that for the expatriate Frenchman the salt of defeat was more bitter than for anyone else who fought with us. By contrast the Englishman, in the extremity of all his adversity, was astonishingly gay. His nature, as always, was infinitely flexible. It was the stiff ram-rod of French character that snapped and, in doing so, left men like René Mouchotte pessimistic, bewildered and with grey dust in their hearts—so much so, in my experience, that when I look back on the summer of 1942 at Tangmere, where I remember toasting *le Quatorze-Juillet* with Mouchotte and his fellow patriots, it is always the irresponsible idiosyncrasies of English voices that I hear. There is, for me, no echo of French laughter.

Escape to England

AT the beginning of the war René Mouchotte, happily for his own ambitions and the survival of French honour, was a pilot instructor. The fact irked him desperately at the time but, fortunately, when the catastrophe of May, 1940, shattered France, he was transferred, with French training units, to Algeria.

He was a big, good-looking man.

fanatically consumed, as pilots so often were, with two immense devotions: his country and his mother. His escape from North Africa to England by way of Gibraltar was brilliantly made in an almost unserviceable plane stolen from under the noses of the authorities in Oran. In England he fought with distinction with the R.A.F. in the Battle of Britain, and continued to keep, almost from day to day, the diaries, now published here, which he had begun in Oran in 1940, "possessed of a huge disgust for the twenty years since 1918, when our politicians showed the world their squabbling and incapacity."

Just over three years later he was shot down and his body washed up near the Hotel Bellevue, Westende-Plage, with "four rings of gold on the sleeves, usual R.A.F. wings above the breast," and having, among other objects, "a pound note and a threepenny piece."

Sombre Tone

THE diaries, not meant for publication, are equally not meant to be read as literature. They are simply random sketches of daily events, excitement, hurts, hopes, disappointments, rumours, reflections, excursions into battle. Their tone is, as I have indicated, serious, not to say sombre, with only occasional touches of exultancy. There is neither jolliness nor talk of popsies. "I have observed that in England the women are either frankly unattractive or else have such pure and regular faces that one seeks in vain for some small defect which would fire the eyes"—it might be some eighteenth-century French marquis recording his impressions of a Sunday morning in Whitehall.

Intensely French, grave, formal, rather reserved and sometimes naïve in tone, infinitely serious, melancholy with patriotism, the diaries are neither controversial nor spectacular. Above all, they are steeped with their author's profound and unshakeable faith in the France for which he died: the testament of a very simple, very likeable, very devoted and, I should guess, a pretty honourable man.