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A Tragic War Diary

Peter Moen's Diary. (Faber. 10s. 6d.)

By H. E. BATES

THE French resistance movement has inspired a considerable literature, both of fact and fiction. We do not hear quite so much of the resistance of other countries, particularly that of Norway, an omission that this diary by a middle-aged Norwegian patriot, Peter Moen, appointed by the underground to be chief of all the illegal papers in the country, does a very great deal to remedy. Similarly we hear, mostly, of patriots who neither betray nor break down under the impingement of their torture and circumstances. This book is the diary of a man who did break down and who did betray.

Peter Moen was arrested by the Gestapo in a round-up of all Norwegians engaged with the underground Press on February 4, 1944, and the diary begins exactly one week later with this most tragic and significant entry: "Have been to two cross-examinations. Was whipped. Betrayed Vic. Am weak. Deserve contempt. Am terrified of pain. But not afraid to die." The diary thereafter continues until September 4, shortly after which Moen was sent to Germany in the prison ship *Westphalen*, only to be drowned when the ship struck a mine off the coast of Sweden.

Before this happened, however, the astonishing secret of the physical existence of the diary had been given to a fellow-prisoner, who survived, and after the liberation of Norway the existence of the

diary was confirmed: it had been written by pricking out the words with a tin-tack from a black-out curtain on separate sheets of toilet paper, each of which Moen had dropped, day by day, through a wall grating in his solitary confinement cell.

It is not surprising that such a document is one of unrelenting, often unbearable pain. From the cruel beaten despair of its first half-dozen sentences practically every syllable is a suppuration poured from the festered wounds of conscience; every page is a desperate essay in self-affliction, in self-torture made more bitterly acute by the terror of isolation—"I know that we shall be forgotten, that we *are* forgotten,"—and by the despair of what Moen himself called the "cellar-problem"—"Are you just as frightened now as before of the whip—of the kicking and twisting of the joints and the blows on the head? I answer myself: Yes, I am hopelessly afraid."

The substance throughout is of the despair that cries unanswered in an awful hell of self-hate and loneliness — "loneliness seems especially hard to bear on Sunday afternoons" — and a dreadful wilderness of spiritual and physical hopelessness. I do not mind confessing that I have not finished this book—its bitterness is made doubly unpalatable by its humility, its anguish more unbearable by a selfless dignity I cannot match and that many others who read it will not be able to match either.