RURAL FRONT LINE

By H. E. BATES

IN the years before the war began it was common to talk of the frontiers of Britain being on the Rhine; the war had not long been in progress before it was obvious that those frontiers in reality lay on the cliffs of Dover. As the collapse of France became inevitable it became obvious also that the lines behind the frontiers would no longer be, as in the last war, the villages and rolling arable countryside of Eastern France, but the villages and hop-gardens, the orchards and rich pasture marches of Kent and Sussex. The difficult and tragic complications in France produced in England a corresponding clarification. For the inhabitants of this small corner of England, bounded on three sides by sea, the war suddenly reached a clear and decisive moment. No longer was it asked which way was the war going. For suddenly the war had come home. No longer was it necessary to possess a map in order to discover the course of the front line. For the front line now ran through the cherry orchards, the hop-gardens, the back-gardens, the woods and pastures and copses. More significantly still, it ran unseen across the summer sky.

When war broke out I had lived in this countryside for ten years. It appeared to me, as association deepened, to be some of the most beautiful in England. It had everything, with the exception of mountains, to make it the richest and most varied country-side we possess: rich in fruit, corn, grass, hops, woodland and downland, varied infinitely by the colour and shape these things imposed on the general face of the land.

Of the people I was not so sure; certainly not so fond. Notorious for unfriendliness, they impressed me with a dark surliness, an attitude of standoffishness to the outer world. Unlike men of the North and Midlands they had little time for argument, less for politics. Falling out of one job straight into another, they knew nothing of the long bone-wearing weeks of unemployment that had scarred the areas of industry. Brought up in a rich sleepy countryside, they had an unlikable independence that mostly sprang from complacency.

But now, suddenly, they were the men of the front line. They formed a new special area for which there was, in

England at any rate, no precedent. They stood between Calais and London. If the *Blitzkrieg* came they lay directly in its path. Their sky, and perhaps their fields, would become the stage for the greatest display of terror the world had ever seen.

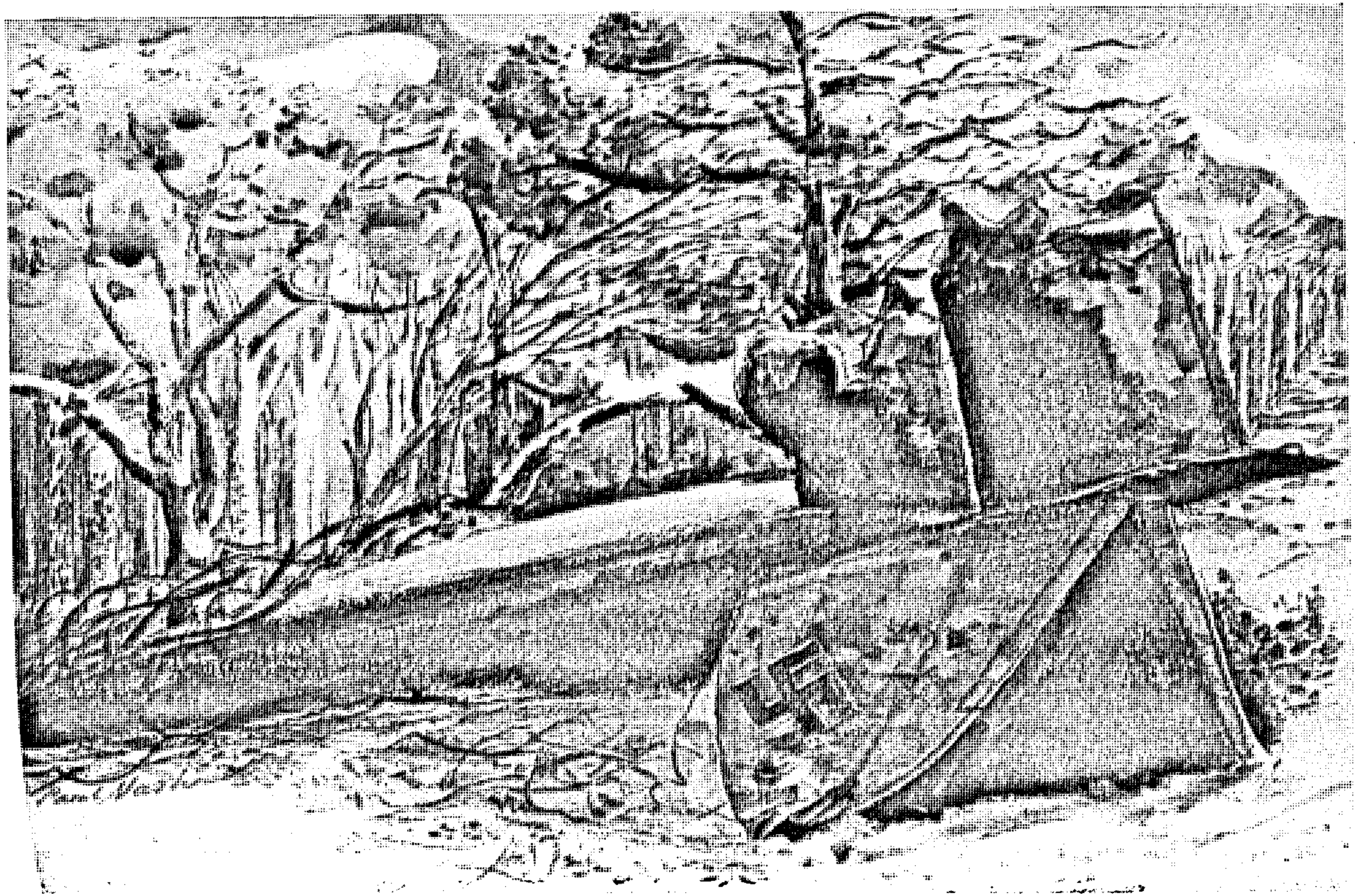
How, I thought, would they react to this? How in fact have they reacted? I date their reaction from the fall of Arras. For me the news of that fall marked the worst day of the war. In it I foresaw the collapse of France. The news of it, given in a B.B.C. bulletin, affected me so deeply that I felt I had to go out instantly and talk about it to the first person I met. I went out on to the village green. Two men, gardeners, were talking over a gate. I went up to them, said in an alarmed voice that Arras had fallen, and waited for their reply. Nothing happened. For the simple reason that they did not know where Arras was.

Moreover they did not care. Arras, Abbeville, Amiens, Rouen—as the obscurely reported collapse went on they revealed the same entirely unchanged indifference. Similarly they did not know Paris: when Mr. Duff Cooper spoke of a visit there, describing the charms of its climate and its cuisine, he evoked no response in them at all. Much more important to them was the summer drought: carrot-fly on the carrots, root-grub on the cauliflowers, caterpillars on the cabbages, the rainless pastures. All this struck them more closely than the progress of Hitler's tanks up the Champs Elysées.

Then the change came. Slowly the mist of their peculiar but quite natural and quite understandable apathy disappeared. "Now", they said, "we know where we are." Men began to join the Home Guard: game-keepers, gardeners, farm labourers, poultry-keepers, flax-workers, bricklayers, quarrymen, schoolmasters, retired officers, railway hands.

But this was not all. This, of course, happened everywhere. In the South-East there had to be, and was, something else. Abstract, impossible to measure but very real, it has been called the hardening of morale. It was indeed this: the increasing determination that set like concrete. And it was only just in time.

For in July the barrages and battles of the front line opened up at last. Two months before the *Blitzkrieg* of London began, the preliminary battle of Kent was being fought day after day, hour after hour, with a methodical insistence that only Teutonic



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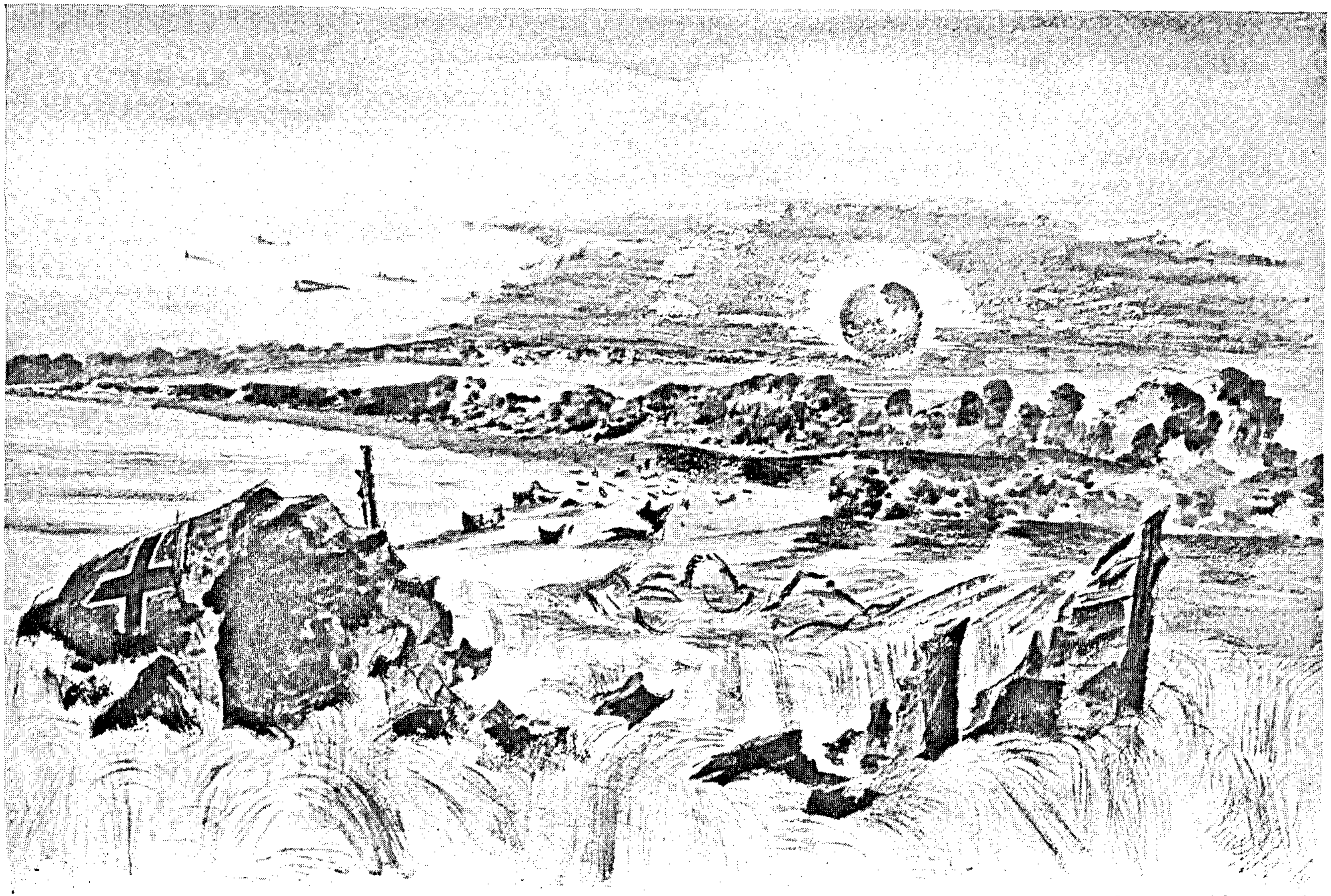
BOMBER IN THE WOOD
By PAUL NASH



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BOMBER IN THE CORN

thoroughness can dictate. So thorough and methodical and well-timed was it, indeed, that soon we too knew exactly when to expect it.

It began to be something like a nicely ordered game. The first move in it was made by the Spitfires. As they roared over the ripening cornfields towards the coast we knew that a raid was imminent. As the raid warning went we turned our eyes upward for the signs of battle. All that time the weather was extraordinarily beautiful: so beautiful that we were presented with a continuously strange phenomenon.

These intense air-battles, the most intense the world had ever known, could not be seen. They were battles of furious ghost-birds. For hours every day the roar of ghost-wings came down to us out of an infinitely lofty blue sky. Occasionally, and much more often as time went on, we caught the moan of the final dying dive.

And the people, down below? How did they take it?

The effect of this continuously fantastic situation, in which unseen birds fought each other in a sky of matchless beauty, was in a sense also fantastic. For it succeeded in arousing not fear, hatred, doubt, pessimism, panic, or indeed any of the emotions it might have aroused or perhaps was designed to arouse, but only the commonest of all the emotions felt by country people—curiosity.

Thus the men of the front line, instead of being the cowed and persecuted victims of the battle, became its spectators. And also they went on with their work. The harvest was cut, shocked, and carried in record time. Fruit was picked, hops sprayed, potatoes dug. In the markets there was the same rich and luscious array of country produce—ballooning marrows, fat peas, beans, carrots, plums, pears, apples, flowers—as in any other summer before the war.

With the production of such things the population of the front line went calmly on as if nothing had happened. For relief they went fishing. And then, it seems to me, was provided the most fantastic touch of all. For I remember on a calm, hot Sunday morning sitting in the shade of a line of white poplars by a lake, my line in the water, when a flight of some hundreds of Nazi fighters and bombers appeared. Instantly there began a series of fights so intense that I rushed from under the trees to

watch them. Down came a Messerschmidt, and back I went to the water. On my line flapped and struggled a pound roach. I cast again and rushed away to see a second Messerschmidt fall. Back to the lake, and another roach on the hook. And this fantastic game of falling fighters and rising fish went on until I was dizzy.

Down on the advanced front line they are still catching roach in calm autumn waters that are broken only by the occasional spatter of falling machine-gun bullets, and the Messerschmidts are still falling out of the otherwise calm autumn sky. More impressive than the paradox of men seriously fishing while the fate of the world is being bitterly battled out above them is the paradox of the behaviour of the people. They still go on almost, naturally not quite, as if nothing had happened. And it is a safe bet that they still will.

MUSIC IN BRITAIN

By DYNELEY HUSSEY

THE outbreak of war was followed by the immediate closing-down of all forms of public entertainment in the evenings. Under the threat of bombardment the B.B.C. removed its main departments, including its famous orchestra, from London. The Promenade Concerts then in progress abruptly ended. The arrangements for the autumn season were abandoned, and musicians of all classes found their engagements cancelled and their livelihood gone overnight.

Out of this ruin of the whole profession the musicians set themselves to retrieve what they could. The initiative and imagination of Miss Myra Hess, combined with goodwill on the part of the Trustees and Director, established in the empty Dome-room of the National Gallery a series of lunch-hour concerts, which proved to be exactly what the greatly enlarged staffs of the Government Departments in Whitehall needed for their recreation. These concerts have been so successful that it is difficult to imagine that they will not continue as a permanent institution in happier times. At them well-known singers, instrumentalists, and chamber-music parties perform programmes of the classics lasting about an hour. They cost the listener one shilling and he can bring his lunch or buy it at the

canteen, and during recent months he has had a show of pictures of war-time activities commissioned by the Government thrown in as bonus. During the year since they were started, these concerts have given work to 1,000 artists and incidentally have raised £6,000 for the Musicians' Benevolent Fund.

It is not to be supposed that these concerts, for which the performers get a small uniform fee, provide a living. But they did revive at a bleak moment the hopes of the professional musician, and gave him the first opportunity of practising his art in war-time. Other places followed their example and concerts were arranged in the City and the suburbs—not in the familiar concert-halls nor at the usual times. This decentralization will surely have done the art of music no harm, and the disappearance of the commercial exploitation of "celebrities" is a positive gain to music as an art. Musicians of the "celebrity" class have, indeed (with one or two honourable exceptions who may be said to have stepped up out of that class), avoided England during the past year.

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The orchestral player had a different problem to face. He cannot take engagements, like a singer or a pianist. He is part of a corporate body, dependent upon the health and well-being of the whole. He is dependent, moreover, upon the financial assistance of wealthy patrons or societies. For orchestral concerts rarely pay their way even in time of peace. The outbreak of war knocked away these artificial supports and made nonsense of the standard of minimum wages established by the Musicians' Union in more prosperous times. However, in the face of seemingly impossible odds, the three great London Orchestras have managed to survive in varying states of prosperity. The B.B.C. Orchestra is, of course, in a special position, independent of ordinary public support. It has been maintained, though outside London, where for some reason or other it has not appeared since the outbreak of war.

Of the other two leading orchestras, the London Symphony had for many years been working on a communal basis, the members sharing whatever profits could be made. They had the support of a small guarantee fund. When the immediate danger of air attack on London did not materialize last autumn