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The Heat of Battle

The Big Show. By Pierre Clostermann, D.F.C. (Chatto and Windus. 12s. 6d.)

By H. E. BATES

WHEN Pierre Clostermann came to England to become a distinguished member of the famous "Alsace" squadron of Free French airmen fighting with the R.A.F., his father, Captain Jacques Clostermann, was stationed at French headquarters in Brazzaville, some thousands of miles away. It occurred to the son that, whether he lived or died, his parents might like to know, by first-hand account, something of "this new life and the mingled feelings it aroused, a life that was unforeseen, often harsh but deeply satisfying. I wanted them to live it with me, day by day, even if I did not come back to describe it myself." He accordingly began to set down, day by day, from his very first training flight on through the tense and unreal years of the early forties until his return to French soil, his impressions, emotions and thoughts as a fighter pilot. It is these impressions, swift, unliterary, set down with taut and nervous haste close to and often in the heat of battle, that form this book, with its portrait not only of Clostermann but of all fighter pilots, and their crazy, unmatched and touching youthfulness everywhere.

Clostermann is now a solid French citizen, back in Alsace, where he has had the distinction of being the youngest member of the *Chambre des Députés*. He is therefore a patriot of intelligence as well as of action, and it occurs to me that there may well be times when, nearly ten years after these impressions were written down, he may find it difficult to believe that

a single word of them is true. It may well be that, to himself, his self-portrait is something out of a dream, a distortion, unrecognisable. The scrambles, the dog-fights, the sorties over French territory; the fear, the heightened perceptions, the cruel refinement of emotions and values by the impact of strain and exultation; the swift translations from bravado to bravery, from bravery to humility, from humility to the sick wonder and thankfulness of a child finding itself saved from the terror of darkness: all that, and much more, whipped by the dazzling necessities of the time into a magnificent craziness, may well seem to him now as unreal as an asylum cell to a lunatic long cured.

For us, however, I feel it can only have the impact of simple and touching truth. No one who has ever stopped on a R.A.F. airfield, to smell the glycol and muck of waiting aircraft, the peculiar fustiness of dispersal huts, and the whipped dust of runways in the tense air, will be able to read these pages, I think, without a good deal more than mere nostalgic emotion. About every authentic account of men fighting and dying in the air there inevitably lurk two haunting and uneasy figures, not necessarily spectral, indeed sometimes impossibly airy and gay: the characters of fear and death. Both walk or dance side by side with Clostermann and his comrades, many of whom are long since dead, throughout the length of this book: giving it, for all its unliterary haste, its hurried simplicities and its sometimes naïve craziness, a most touching, truthful and tenuous beauty