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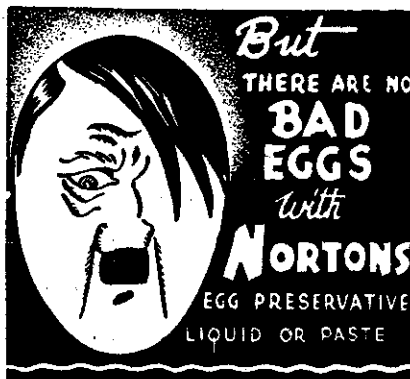
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A WOMAN LEARNS TO SHOOT

SATURDAY afternoon again, and a rush to get ready for Home Guard. For in our house Home Guard is a family affair. Mother and father both go. Father is in charge of a section, and mother is a signaller. So on Saturday mornings the children do the shopping, mother hurries through the house with broom, dustpan and mop, and father tries to get home from the office early. At 12.30 we assemble for lunch and at 12.55 we send the children off for their music lesson and hurry down the hill hoping the others haven't fallen in yet.

Fortunately they haven't. The captain and the lieutenant are there. The visiting sergeant-major, brought over specially to supervise the rifle practice, is there. Practically everyone is there. We join the group of signallers. There are seven women among them, ranging all the way from middle-aged housewives to youthful shop assistants. The captain approaches our group. "How many of you ladies would like to take rifle practice?" he asks. Every hand goes up. He confers with the section leader, and we eventually fall in with the rest of the company.

The pace they set marching out to the rifle range is hard. For some reason they always put the women in the rear ranks when we march with the men. Some of us are very short. We find ourselves stretching out to the limit to keep the pace. The lieutenant in charge comes to the rear and sees our difficulty. He shortens the step. We breathe much more easily. We are even able to exchange opinions on the picture we saw last night. It was Joan Crawford in *Susan and God*. Quite a good plot, but terribly over-acted, we agree. We used to like Joan Crawford. We still do, as a matter of fact. We are marching easy by now and are allowed to talk. The captain and the sergeant-major pass us in a car. We know now how the "tommie" feels when the colonel goes by on his horse.

HAVING reached the rifle range we fall into single file and trek over paddocks ankle deep in mud. We climb down a gully and ford a stream. We arrive panting at the firing positions. Nothing very spectacular greets our eye. A little hillock of mud and turf thrown up for the men to lie and sight on. A long, narrow strip of burlap stretched between two posts for the targets to be pasted on.

An N.C.O. takes the ladies aside and explains the different parts of an army rifle. He shows us how to load and unload. He points out the safety catch. The rifle is passed round. We all load a spent cartridge and eject it. We try the safety catch. We say mentally to ourselves that we must above all things remember the workings of the safety catch.

Suddenly the quietness is broken by a most unearthly, ear-splitting racket almost at our elbows. A yard or two away the first batch of men have fired their first round. "Good heavens! Is

Written for
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by M.E.K.

this the noise an army rifle makes?" We had had a vague idea that it might sound something like the air rifle our brother used to pot at birds with. "Good Lord! Are we expected to fire those things?" We forget the N.C.O. and watch the men stretched out on their stomachs in the mud. Crash! The air is split with a second volley. The noise is taken up by the hills around and thrown back at us. We notice how the body of each man twitches from head to foot as the rifle is fired. Heavens! What did we join the Home Guard for? What made us think we would like to fire a rifle in case we needed to in an emergency? We feel a little sick at the stomach. This is no place for a woman. We can't see ourselves stretched out in the mud being licked black and blue across the collarbone by a brute of an army rifle. Is there any way of getting out of it gracefully?

THERE is not. We asked for rifle practice and we got it. We've got to go through with it, if only to prove that we can take it.

We move up closer. Perhaps it isn't so bad, after all. Another volley is fired. And another. The men finish their allotted number of shots and make way for a second batch. They run down the range to see their score. They come back talking excitedly and comparing notes. The second batch take their place. There are some very weedy youths among them. We watch them, hardly more than boys, certainly not much over sixteen. They sight their rifles. They fire. Their bodies twitch convulsively. They reload and fire again. They finish off their ammunition and rise apparently unconcerned to see what their score is.

Surely, we think, if mere boys can fire these things and enjoy it, they won't hurt us. "I'm scared stiff," confides one middle-aged housewife to another. "So am I," says the other, "but those boys don't seem to mind."

"They don't, do they?" says the first woman, taking a little comfort from the thought.

We stand and watch as one batch succeeds another. The noise no longer bothers us. We notice that one man dabs at a cut at the side of his mouth. He presses the gun hard against the side of his cheek as he fires. We tell ourselves mentally that we must keep our face away from the rifle butt. We suddenly remember that somewhere, some time, we have heard of a rifle exploding and killing a man as he fired it. Did we hear of it, or didn't we? Could such a thing happen? These must be very old army



rifles. The N.C.O. said they were. Suppose one exploded just as we fired it? We almost feel the blast, and the pieces of metal embedded in our cheek. Oh, darn it, everyone takes chances in war-time. What about the boys who actually do the fighting? What about the people who are being bombed in London? What about those sixteen-year-old boys down there? They don't seem to mind.

THE sergeant-major calls out. "Now then, you ladies, how many of you want to fire?" There is no rush for places. We all hang back. Then, "Oh, for heaven's sake let's get it over," and four of us plod down in the mud.

The rifle is very heavy. Also it is too long. We dig our elbows into the earth. We can't reach far enough along the stock to raise it the required height from the ground. We try another position. We struggle frantically to get the knob on the barrel in line with the V further up the stock. We search for the little black bull's-eye on the target. We find it, but it wavers. Our stomach feels decidedly shaky. Finally we get the black dot at the end of our rifle. This will have to do, we think. We remember that we must hold the rifle firmly or it will give a tremendous kick. We set our mouth grimly and tighten our hold. We give the trigger a steady pressure. Crash! The thing goes off. We feel as if someone has hit us on the collarbone with a stick.

We go through the performance again, and again. "Am I getting anywhere near that thing?" we ask, hopelessly. "Well, says the Home Guardsman stretched out beside us, "I can see one shot on it, anyway."

"On the target? Good heavens!" This is beginning to get interesting. We fire another shot. And another. Our shoulder feels as if a mule had kicked it. We look dazedly around for more ammunition. "That's the lot," says the Home Guardsman, and we realise that we are through.

"Well," we think, "we could have fired another lot like that," and we hurry down the range to see the score.

"Well, I got one on there. Good heavens! I got two. Jiminy Christmas, I got three!" Three out of five on the target, and two of them quite close to the bull's-eye. "Good shooting," says the sergeant-major, and our chest expands a bit. How on earth did we do it?