

BOOK RECORD

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COUNTRY WITHOUT HERO

Beverley Nichols Discusses An
Undisciplined Nation Led By
Dreamers And Grandfathers

Special Review By Trevor Lane.



BEVERLEY NICHOLS—"Let
Us Visit An Air Raid Shelter."

SUSAN and Penelope, in dresses as yellow as the crocuses, were having the time of their five-year-old lives . . . their chubby legs flashed across the green grass.

On the Serpentine was a boat-load of boys, laughing and skylarking . . . the boat wobbled . . . there was a splash, and a moment later a grinning, streaming face bobbed above the water . . .

London's Hyde Park on this golden April afternoon was incredibly lovely, so young in its tender foliage, so wise and restful in its century-old knowledge . . .

Clattering a rhythm of spring on the road beside the lake came four horses drawing a shiny black carriage. The coachman sat up straight as a ramrod, his whip held at the right angle . . . and there, with her feathers dancing in the breeze, was a little old woman, a proud figure left over from a Victorian age of dignity and leisure . . .

There was a low, angry hum in the air now . . . over the tall towers that weave a skyline pattern along Park Lane came six silver bombing planes . . . six gleaming tokens of death. . .

Susan and Penelope were playing still, the laughter of the boys in the boat was drowned a little . . . only the little old woman in the carriage looked up and shuddered and drew the rug about her knees. She had seen it all before . . .

BUT this was England, and the sun was warm. I went back to my book, and I didn't like what I read there:

"After all, it is a long time since the days of William the Conqueror, when we were last invaded. It is a long time, too, since the last war, when air-raids, compared with modern air-raids, were no more irritating than a swarm of flies. We do not realise that the whole history of the world might be changed in forty-eight hours, and that we might sud-

denly descend from our proud position as an Imperial race to a position akin to that of Holland, but a Holland with empty coffers and a starving population."

I looked up at the planes again. I tried to picture them, not as friendly British planes, but as an enemy, and not as six, but as six hundred, raining death and horror and mutilation. I read on . . .

"And now let us visit one of the largest air-raid shelters in England. . . . It is chill inside here in this great cave which stretches and stretches, through dark to greater dark, under the towering hills . . . it grows increasingly cold . . . It certainly wants people in it, five thousand of them. Crouched together while the bombs thunder outside and the echoes of their falling roar like wind through the twisted caverns. Staring at each other tight-lipped, while the children scream. Wondering if their breathing is quite normal, wondering if the gas has got in, if there isn't perhaps a cloud, just a faint yellow cloud, over the lamps."

Not a pretty picture, but then the people who love their England have given up painting pretty pictures. To some, with the mentalities of certain town councillors, England is still a

*. . . fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war.*

The book I had was Beverley Nichols's latest, "News of England," and it rang so true that it made gloomy reading. England may still be "this precious stone set in the silver sea," but it is to-day the most vulnerable country in Europe, a fact not even partially realised by the average English citizen.

I READ the chapters on war and defence with the greatest interest, for, since the Austrian conquest, the Government has been doing its best to arouse the nation to its danger. From every hoarding, from every loud-speaker, come appeals for prepared-

The other night there was air-raid drill in Paddington. Street lights were put out, stretcher-bearers and ambulances and firemen stood by. Sirens moaned, "bodies" were brought from basements, decontamination squads raced through darkened streets.

In a restaurant the next evening I heard the activities discussed by two men. "Did you see the air-raid people rushing about in Paddington last night?" asked one. "Right in our street, too. We had a grandstand view of the whole thing . . . jolly good show, in fact."

I have in front of me a pamphlet headed, "Air Raid Precautions—What You Can Do." It quotes a portion of the Home Secretary's recent speech: "We want at least a million men and women, and we want them for work that, in an emergency, would be exacting and dangerous. The job is not an amusement in peace-time, nor would it be a soft job in time of war."

The A.R.P., as the organisation is known, is seeking recruits in every city and hamlet in England. On the walls of ancient Chichester Cathedral the other day, I saw a huge poster, "Your Country Wants You—NOW!" The A.R.P. wants air-raid wardens, first-aid parties, decontamination squads, ambulance drivers, rescue parties. I offered my services to the A.R.P., but was told that I was "too young." Only men over thirty are wanted. Quaint—but true.

ENGLAND, like Beverley Nichols, has changed considerably in the past ten years. "On the material side," writes Mr. Nichols, "we have the prospect of an undisciplined nation with a declining population in possession of an utterly unreasonable proportion of the world's riches. This nation, which
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