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Shooting a Line

By H.E.B.

Line-shooting, like eating peas with a knife, is bad form. And though there have been times, we confess, when we have felt a strong temptation to eat our peas with a knife, a process that could hardly be more difficult than the fork, fear alone has prevented us. Fear too has prevented many people, though not ourselves, from taking off their shoes in restaurants after a hot walk, from removing their coat and collar in the Ritz, from saying that cricket is a ridiculous game. It has prevented them, in short, from giving natural expression to themselves.

Now we are inclined to believe that line-shooting is a natural thing. We all declare it, of course, to be quite the opposite. To be a terrible line-shooter is to be the equivalent of the little boy who splits on other little boys, of the grown man who laughs, when all others are silent, at his own jokes. It is to be the outsider. But it also expresses the desire to be noticed, the desire to be thought well of, the desire, perhaps above all, to draw the attention of others to the details of an extraordinary, dangerous, funny, unconventional or shattering experience.

On the other hand, the non-line-shooter is ostensibly the modest fellow who never thinks of himself, who abhors the thought of projecting his character socially, who would be horrified at his picture in the paper.

Now we confess that, after some months at stations in both Fighter and Bomber Commands, we are very suspicious of the non-line-shooter. We confess, in fact, that we are very suspicious of the whole business of line-shooting in general. We are suspicious of it for the same reasons as we are suspicious of the school of tough writing. The school of tough writing is really, in our view, not tough at all. At best it is an attempt to avoid sentimentalism; at worst it is a species of inverted sentimentalism itself. It reminds us of the story

of Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, learning to ride a bike. His one object was to avoid a collision with a lady also learning to ride. The only result was that he knocked her down.

Similarly the non-line-shooter attempts to avoid publicity; and may succeed, very often, in running straight into it. Colonel T. E. Lawrence, later Aircraftman T. E. Shaw, was perhaps the supreme example of the type. Lawrence made desperate attempts to hide from publicity. It pursued him relentlessly. He hid in a cottage in the country. Press reporters retorted by hiding in his garden. He was never seen, if possible, in public. Photographers thereupon photographed him from behind gooseberry bushes. His simplest everyday movement was liable to be misconstrued as an international complication.

Inadvertently, in short, he shot a bigger line than any man of his time. We are all familiar, too, with the film actress who, emerging from the divorce court or the specially marked cabin of the luxury liner at 4 a.m. in the morning, indignantly smashes the nearest press camera with her umbrella. By so doing she takes up the non-line-shooting attitude, only to find herself on the front page of every newspaper the following morning.

We ourselves have had, during this war, considerable experience in shooting lines for other people: not only for pilots, but sometimes for departments of the R.A.F. All pretended to regard with traditional horror the idea of shooting a line for the press. Only with great difficulty were they persuaded to deliver the gen on their achievement. Our private opinion is that they were really tickled to death: an impression more than once confirmed by visits to pilots' rooms, when we were highly interested to be shown amazing collections of line-shoot in every form, from paragraphs in the press to photographs, from pocket-books full of clippings to whole scrap books of personal

ROYAL AIR FORCE JOURNAL

advertisement. It was these, we confess, that so shook our faith in the modesty of non-line shooters.

By contrast we noted that the three best pilots we ever knew—one English, one Scottish, one Czech—were never afraid of shooting a simple, straightforward, honest line. They made no pretence of modesty. Was it an accident, we wondered, that they were men whose lives were clear and definite, whose purposes were direct and unencumbered? We noted that they made no pretence of bravery; nor were they ashamed of admitting their fear. They hated bureaucracy; were very human and very outspoken. To them the shooting of a line was not a silly thing; it was a natural thing. And to us, we confess, they seemed very natural men. They were doing a job and doing it successfully and well. Was

there any need for them to deny themselves the right of any man to pride in his work?

In short, we confess that we are a little tired of the craze for under-statement. It is a very English virtue. Its danger is that, like the schoolboy code of honour, it may become a form of communal persecution. We do not suggest any change so revolutionary as that pilots should henceforth run their own advertisement agencies, any more than we desire to see the general eating of peas accomplished by the knife instead of the fork. We merely suggest that we should all be, perhaps, a little more honest about the business of line-shooting. For there are many things worse than shooting a line, and some as bad. One of them is false modesty; another is setting out to ride a bicycle and, like Tolstoy, knocking a lady down.

