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# A REMARKABLE WAR STORY

*The Cage.* By Dan Billany and David Dowie. (Longmans. 9s. 6d.)

By H. E. BATES

THE publisher's announcement on the jacket of this book is surely unique in our time. "Anyone who has information which may lead to the discovery of the fate of Dan Billany and/or David Dowie," it says, "is asked to communicate with the publishers."

Billany and Dowie, two young officers, were captured in Africa in the summer of 1942; transferred as prisoners-of-war to Italy, living for more than a year in various camps there; and released on the Italian surrender in 1943. They were in Mantua in December of that year. There is, then, from that moment, no word of them—except this remarkable manuscript, written in collaboration, with naked force and astringent frankness and sometimes with the uneasiest mixture of naïveté and blind truth, during their captivity. Left with a friendly Italian farmer who kept it during the rest of the war and sent it to Billany's parents in 1946, it reaches us now as perhaps the most extraordinary personal document of the war.

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READERS of "The Wooden Horse" who are looking for an Italian successor to that book will not find it here. "The Wooden Horse" is a physical narrative, superbly exciting, amusing, not very well written. "THE CAGE" has nothing to do with escape. That subject, which pervades so passionately every page of "The Wooden Horse," concerns these authors hardly at all. It is of less account to them than food, warmth, exercise, their fellow prisoners themselves, their psychological and emotional reassessments, the efficiency of latrines. They even go so far, in a brilliant piece of fooling, as to write gay and cruel burlesques of those who dig tunnels.

They are concerned not with outward, physical escape at all, but with escape, as it were, within: through themselves, out of themselves, into the souls of themselves. Their book is, in fact, an almost continuous searching and baring

of the young soul. None but the very young, the very sensitive, the very lonely and the very embittered could have written it; and the miracle of it is that it is saved from tedium by an adulthood of humour, of irony and of wisdom far beyond the years of young men who "discover with guilty surprise that some of your impulses seem rather juvenile."

The tone of "The Wooden Horse," it will be remembered, was rather hearty; the treacherous subject of male relationships was circumvented with rapidity and embarrassment. By contrast the whole of the second part of "The Cage" is devoted to prolonged exploration of that theme; and to me, partly because the quasi-fictional character of Alan is a shadowy deviation from the fierce etching of the rest of the book, it is the least impressive part of it.

The method of personal soliloquies, of allowing each character in turn to do his personal soul-searching aloud, comes, now and then, very near to an embarrassment. But I offer even that remark with the utmost humility, since a critic writing in the calm of an English day can presume to know nothing of what David Dowie—the masculine, objective, fooling, humorous one—calls "the no-man's land of life, the purgatory of aimlessness."

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WHO were these young men? What did they do? Why did we never hear of them before? They had remarkable gifts; their writing has astonishing maturity. It seems incredible that this document, so vivid and assured and without the faintest sign in it of the perfunctory amateur, can be, and must remain, their only published work. If they ever asked a memorial—and they would probably have blown a sustained raspberry in pidgin Italian at any such fatuous suggestion—they could hardly have asked for a better one than this. It is unique in that they not only made it themselves, but that, unlike those of commoner manufacture, it is completely worthy of them.