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# VINTAGE ESCAPE

*The Colditz Story. By P. R. Reid. (Hodder & Stoughton. 15s.)*

*By H. E. BATES*

**C**OLDITZ, though notorious in two wars, does not carry with it the stench of Dachau or Buchenwald. It is purely a military fortress prison, a Saxon *Schloss* of formidable situation providing, in its pictures of floodlit towers and battlements, every child's fairy-dream of a giant's castle in white sugar. To it, four hundred miles from the nearest frontier point not under Nazi control, were sent escapees of various nationalities, principally British, Canadian, French, Dutch and Polish—all of them men who had had a crack at escaping from lesser prisons and had failed.

This indeed was an essential introduction to Colditz; every prisoner had to take his examination to graduate there—with the result that Colditz, like a good university or a tough gaol, contained the cream of its kind. Mr. Reid's examination for his graduation was speedily taken. He was captured in June, 1940; by September he emerged one morning from Laufen, his prep-school as he himself calls it, disguised as a woman—a disguise admirable in every respect except that it was mercilessly penetrated by a small child playing on the pavement with her toys.

In Colditz the garrison manning the camp outnumbered the prisoners at all times; the castle was floodlit at night from every angle despite the black-out, and notwithstanding the sheer drop of a hundred feet or so on the outside from barred windows sentries surrounded the camp within a pallsade of barbed wire. At first, as chief escape officer, Mr. Reid set about testing this proposition with invention, resource, courage, ingenuity and above all that quality which, to my mind, is somewhere in or behind all stories of British escapers—sheer cussedness. Those who study the effects of our educational system may find it

interesting to note how many of Mr. Reid's most resourceful and incorrigible colleagues in the continuous job of trying to escape from Colditz were products of public schools; it is in fact undeniable that the atmosphere of Mr. Reid's book, like others of its kind, has sometimes the quality of a grimmer, deadlier, more chilling and more exhilarating "Stalky and Co."

Mr. Reid and his colleagues had little difficulty in progressing naturally from stinks, booby traps and roof-scaling to brewing prison beer, distilling prison spirits, picking apparently thief-proof locks, forging passports, injecting cultures of dry-rot into the Colditz woodwork, tunnelling incessantly and generally becoming highly proficient in the business of disguise and deceit.

Thus armed, it is not surprising that several of them, including Mr. Reid, finally and successfully broke the legend of Colditz and escaped to Switzerland—having demonstrated to the Nazis two things they had overlooked, first that successful escapes depend mostly on the accumulation of escape technique, and that in Colditz were gathered all the best escape technicians of the Allied Forces from all over the world, and second that in Colditz was concentrated the highest possible Allied morale.

"The Colditz Story" is written with a disarming modesty, never false, often amusing and generally most intelligent, that almost conceals the remorseless qualities behind it.

## IN BRIEF

### To the Editor

A Letter to the Editor. By Stanley Rubinstein. (Wingate. 8s. 6d.)  
In a letter to THE SUNDAY TIMES Mr. Rubinstein asked what