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Two Novelists Use Thriller Technique

Nazi Menace In England

Reviewed by
Klaus Mann

BLACK-OUT IN GRETLEY. By J. B. Priestley. Horper. 273 pp. \$2.50.

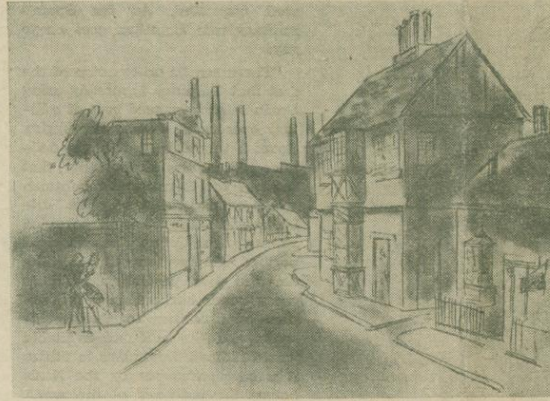
THERE are two J. B. Priestleys: one a sturdy playwright and novelist of the good old English tradition; the other, a political figure of major influence—the most active, most conspicuous character in English wartime literature.

"Black-out in Gretley" seems, at first glance, definitely the work of Priestley number one, as neat and competent a job as is to be expected from the author of "Angel Pavement." It's Priestley at his best, which is to say that it is pretty good but not really stunning, from an artistic or psychological point of view. Not that there is anything vulgar about this brilliantly-made "Story of — and for — Wartime." Priestley commands not only a reliable, solid talent but also a good deal of literary taste and experience. He is never cheap, and he is certainly never clumsy; but his devices are at times a little bit on the obvious side.

How excellently made!—this grim, factual account of fifth column activities in a medium-sized English manufacturing town. It's a dreary place, Gretley, full of ominous whispers and mysteries—where the hero and narrator of the story has to hunt Nazi agents for the British counter-espionage. His name is Humphrey Neyland and he is a Canadian, "large-boned, dark, long-faced, and inclined to be sour, intelligent rather than subtle. . . ."

And that is the way he tells his story—with intelligence and drastic realism rather than with charm and subtlety. However, Humphrey Neyland—or J. B. Priestley—is remarkably good at introducing and describing human characters: they all are really alive, the villains as well as their victims. What an uncanny lot! They might belong to the cast of a first-rate spy-thriller directed by Alfred Hitchcock—all these suspects who turn out to be innocent like Mrs. Yesmond of the Queen of Clubs, who seems to be the queen of the fifth columnists but is really "just playing about with the black market, just a handsome, luxurious, lecherous rat.") These seemingly innocuous, or even respectable, ladies and gentlemen hide their wickedness under all kinds of clever disguises: Diana Axton, who thinks herself a Wagnerian heroine and serves her Nazi bosses by keeping a "harmless gift shop on Market Square"; Joe, "always the life and soul of any party, in his bar at the Queen of Clubs, where the drinks were always moving fast and the Air Force and Army boys couldn't help talking a bit of shop"; Mademoiselle Fifine, an acrobat, who uses the stage of a music hall to communicate with her fellow conspirators; yes, and Colonel Tarlington, the dignified citizen and rigid nationalist, who shelters in his house the leader of all Nazi intrigues in Gretley—Captain Felix Rodel from Germany.

Colonel Tarlington is Colonel Blimp—turned nasty and dangerous. No doubt Priestley is rather bold when he presents a rigid British Conservative as an enemy agent. He does so, by no means only for the sake of an effective finale, but for serious, well-considered rea-



Jacket design for "Black-out in Gretley."

sons. The novel, "Black-out in Gretley," is written against Colonel Tarlington and his ilk. What seems to be an unassuming thriller turns out to be a document of political significance—unmasking and indicting certain types of the English upper class and "the bone-headed way they're running this war, mud-

dling and messing in the same old fashion and making the people feel frustrated." Thus Priestley number two joins Priestley number one in this novel. Or rather, Priestley, the political critic and propagandist, uses Priestley, the efficient entertainer, to dramatize his earnest and stirring message.

Civic Crusade of an Old A



From "A Treasury

Thomas W. Nason's woodcut, "Village St

Reviewed by
Edward J. Cronin

COLONEL EFFINGHAM'S RAID. By Berry Fleming. Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 279 pp. \$2.50.

W* SEABORN EFFINGHAM, Colonel U.S. Army, retired, returns to his native Fredericksville, Ga., to spend his remaining years. He has already had an active army life; he is 65, so you could expect him to enjoy his sunset among garden flowers and memories. But, old battle horse that he is, he recognizes an enemy when he sees one. He makes his first civilian—and some would call it unsuccessful—"raid" against the hypocrisy and polite corruption of his home town

He opens his campaign by capturing the position of columnist (without pay) on Fredericksville's "other" newspaper, *The Leader*. At first he confines himself to the relatively harmless field of local history and military strategy. Then he inadvertently opposes the re-

naming of the town's Memorial Square for Pud Toolen, a recently deceased mayor. Next and even more dangerously he opposes the razing of the town courthouse to make way for a newer—and costlier—edifice. The Colonel is quite confident that he can win this battle for, does he not have the great democratic force, "the will of the people," behind him? Doesn't an impartial engineer, another retired Army man, give evidence that the building is simply in need of repair? Doesn't he have, even, written proof that the town councilmen lied in giving estimates? But it's just one of those things—nothing happens. That other shibboleth of democratic government, "the duly appointed," is too much for its rival, "the common will."

"Colonel Effingham's Raid" is excellent satire and, like all good satire, it expertly blends contraries—here, humor and there a deep seriousness. Moreover, Fleming writes as with a surgeon's scalpel for, on almost every page, he cuts through the fat, deep but painlessly. I want to give you my favorite in-