

VINTAGE CLASSICS



William
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WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

Soldiers' Pay



CHAPTER ONE

I

ACHILLES: Did you shave this morning, Cadet?

MERCURY: Yes, Sir.

ACHILLES: What with, Cadet?

MERCURY: Issue, Sir.

ACHILLES: Carry on, Cadet. *Old Play (about 19-?)*

LOWE, JULIAN, number —, late a Flying Cadet, Umptieth Squadron, Air Service, known as 'One Wing' by the other embryonic aces of his flight, regarded the world with a yellow and disgruntled eye. He suffered the same jaundice that many a more booted one than he did, from Flight Commanders through Generals to the ambrosial single-barred (not to mention that inexplicable beast of the field which the French so beautifully call an aspiring aviator); they had stopped the war on him.

So he sat in a smouldering of disgusted sorrow, not even enjoying his Pullman prerogatives, spinning on his thumb his hat with its accursed white band.

'Had your nose in the wind, hey, buddy?' said Yaphank, going home and smelling to high heaven of bad whisky.

'Ah, go to hell,' he returned sourly and Yaphank doffed his soiled hat.

'Why, sure, General - or should I of said Lieutenant? Excuse me, madam. I got gassed doing k.p. and my sight ain't been the same since. On to Berlin! Yeh, sure, we're on to Berlin. I'm on to you, Berlin. I got your number. Number no thousand no hundred and naughty naught Private (very private) Joe Gilligan, late for parade, late for fatigue, late for breakfast when breakfast is late. The Statue of Liberty ain't never seen me, and if she do, she'll have to 'bout face.'

Cadet Lowe raised a sophisticated eye. 'Say, whatcher thinking, anyway?'

'Buddy, I dunno. Fellow that makes it was gave a Congressional medal last Chuesday because he has got a plan to stop the war. Enlist all the Dutchmen in our army and make 'em drink

so much of his stuff a day for forty days, see? Ruin any war. Get the idea?

'I'll say. Won't know whether it's a war or a dance, huh?'

'Sure, they can tell. The women will all be dancing. Listen, I had a swell jane and she said, "for Christ's sake, you can't dance". And I said, "like hell I can't". And we was dancing and she said, "what are you, anyways?" And I says, "what do you wanta know for? I can dance as well as any general or major or even a sergeant, because I just win four hundred in a poker game," and she said, "oh, you did?" and I said, "sure, stick with me, kid," and she said, "where is it?" Only I wouldn't show it to her and then this fellow come up to her and said, "are you dancing this one?" And she said, "sure, I am. This bird don't dance." Well, he was a sergeant, the biggest one I ever seen. Say, he was like that fellow in Arkansaw that had some trouble with a nigger and a friend said to him, "well, I hear you killed a nigger yesterday." And he said, "yes, weighed two hundred pounds." Like a bear.' He took the lurching of the train limberly and Cadet Lowe said, 'For Christ's sake.'

'Sure,' agreed the other. 'She won't hurt you, though. I done tried it. My dog won't drink none of it of course, but then he got bad ways hanging around Brigade H.Q. He's the one trophy of the war I got: something that wasn't never bawled out by a shave-tail for not saluting. Say, would you kindly like to take a little something to keep off the summiferous dews of this goddam country? The honour is all mine and you won't mind it much after the first two drinks. Makes me homesick: like a garage. Ever work in a garage?'

Sitting on the floor between two seats was Yaphank's traveling companion, trying to ignite a splayed and sodden cigar. Like devastated France, thought Cadet Lowe, swimming his memory through the adenoidal reminiscences of Captain Bleyth, an R.A.F. pilot delegated to temporarily reinforce their democracy.

'Why, poor soldier,' said his friend, tearfully, 'all alone in no man's land and no matches. Ain't war hell? I ask you.' He tried to push the other over with his leg, then he fell to kicking him, slowly. 'Move over, you ancient mariner. Move over, you goddam bastard. Alas, poor Jerks or something (I seen that in a

play, see? Good line) come on, come on; here's General Pershing come to have a drink with the poor soldiers.' He addressed Cadet Lowe. 'Look at him: ain't he sodden in depravity?'

'Battle of Coonyak,' the man on the floor muttered. 'Ten men killed. Maybe fifteen. Maybe hundred. Poor children at home saying "Alice, where art thou?"'

'Yeh, Alice. Where in hell are you? That other bottle. What'n'ell have you done with it? Keeping it to swim in when you get home?'

The man on the floor weeping said: 'You wrong me as ever man wronged. Accuse me of hiding mortgage on house? Then take this soul and body; take all. Ravish me, big boy.'

'Ravish a bottle of vinegar juice out of you, anyway,' the other muttered, busy beneath the seat. He rose triumphant, clutching a fresh bottle. 'Hark! the sound of battle and the laughing horses draws near. But shall they dull this poor unworthy head? No! But I would like to of seen one of them laughing horses. Must of been lady horses all together. Your extreme highness' - with ceremony, extending the bottle - 'will you be kind enough to kindly condescend to honour these kind but unworthy strangers in a foreign land?'

Cadet Lowe accepted the bottle, drank briefly, gagged and spat his drink. The other supporting him massaged his back. 'Come on, come on, they don't nothing taste that bad.' Kindly cupping Lowe's opposite shoulder in his palm he forced the bottle mouthward again. Lowe released the bottle, defending himself. 'Try again. I got you. Drink it, now.'

'Jesus Christ,' said Cadet Lowe, averting his head.

Passengers were interested and Yaphank soothed him. 'Now, now. They won't nothing hurt you. You are among friends. Us soldiers got to stick together in a foreign country like this. Come on, drink her down. She ain't worth nothing to no one, spit on his legs like that.'

'Hell, man, I can't drink it.'

'Why, sure you can. Listen: think of flowers. Think of your poor grey-haired mother hanging on the front gate and sobbing her grey-haired heart out. Listen, think of having to go to work again when you get home. Ain't war hell? I would of been a corporal at least, if she had just hung on another year.'