

Article ★ Story



Essay ★ Poetry

# Any war is plain international dumbness

By Paul E. Svoboda.

"Hey, waiter! Give us four more of those things, you know," the man gesticulated with his hands for loss of words, "those things—vin de fleur, or whatever you call them—and rush it, willya?"

His voice was almost drowned in the noise of the crowd. The men and women laughed and danced in a hurried frenzy as if they were trying to crowd all their gaiety into one night. Uniformed men, tired of war, its dirt and filth, sat drinking their wine in a business-like fashion trying to forget that tomorrow they were to move into the line near Flambeaux where the Nazis were pushing hard with all they had. Even now they could hear the dull roar of cannon and bombs unloading their cargoes of death in the distance. Occasionally the windows trembled when a shell exploded far behind the lines and everyone in the small cafe sat

motionless looking off into space.

Drink to the dead.

"Well, who will we drink this one too? Paul—dead somewhere in Alsace-Lorraine? To Chuck, who crashed his plane on the other side of the line, or Bill, or Jim, or —?"

"For Christ's sake, Mike, shut up! Ain't it enough that maybe all of us will be out there with a load of lead in our ribs? What's the use of bringing them up? What's done's done. No matter what you or I say ain't going to change it any."

"Yeah, I guess you're right, Frank, Mike said thoughtfully, yeah I guess you're right."

"You bet I am. Drink up and we'll have another. How about you Dutch? Pierre?"

The two men downed their wine quickly and shoved the glasses to the center of the table. Frank raised his hand and gesticulated

for the waiter to bring another bottle.

Pierre, got any cigarettes? Hey, Pierre, wake up! What the Hell ya doin'? Dutch asked.

A good target.

"Jus' thinking, that's all, jus' thinking about tomorrow when we gotta go up there and play target for them Nazi bullets and wondering if maybe I'll get back to Missouri again. Bessie needs me a lot; more than ever now since the kid came. Funny, I ain't seen him yet. Here it's dawn near Fourth of July and the kid'll be four on the 26th and he ain't never seen his pop. Bessie and I got married in February of '41 and we lived together for three months—best three months I ever lived—then I got called over here to help fight this war that somebody got us into just because we have to protect our rights. Can't see how they're my rights. The only right I have is the right to live." His clenched fist pounded the table. "I gotta get through it. I gotta!"

In same boat.

"We're all in the same boat. Mike here has a wife and two kids waiting for him in the Bronx. Dutch's got a mother back in Illinois, and I, well, I hope I've got a girl waiting for me back in Nebraska," Frank said.

The windows rattled again; even the wine jiggled in the glasses a little as another shell exploded somewhere close. The music from the three piece band came to a discordant stop. The bartender let the whisky overflow from a glass he was filling. Everyone seemed cemented in his tracks. A moment later the band took up again, the women began to laugh a little, and a few dancers began to move about the floor. Soon everything was the same as before.

"What the Hell's wrong with

them Germans? Can't they wait 'til tomorrow to start pluggin' at us? Their 75's have been landin' all over the country. Either the gunners are drunk or they're just plain fools," Mike said when everybody started to move about again.

20 million men.

"Probably fluke shells," Pierre said. "Good powder is getting plenty scarce for them just like it is for us. With 20 million men blowing hell outa' each other day and night there's bound to be some kind of shortage. I heard that the boats from home can't haul the stuff over here fast enough."

Mike pushed back his chair, gulped down his liquor, and stood up. He cocked his overseas hat over his eye and straightened his tie.

"You're not leaving are ya, Mike?" Frank asked.

"Hell, no. That little French gal over there by the band winked at me and I never was the man to pass up a chance. Probably be the last girl that'll ever wink at me after tomorrow. Well, I'll be seeing you."

The rest of them around the table laughed raucously. They understood. War makes a man understand a lot of things. Why in the Hell shouldn't a man have a little fun? May be his last—

Women and war.

"Give her our regards," Dutch said laughingly as Mike made his way across the dime-sized dance floor. They bent over their glasses again as Pierre said, "Say, I heard in St. Barritz when I was in the hospital that the president asked congress to give those four college kids who captured Hitler for that million bucks a bonus of a hundred grand apiece. Man, what I couldn't do with a hundred G's."

"Me too," Dutch exclaimed. "You know, that was the damndest thing. I can't figure out how

those guys ever managed to fly that plane half way over Germany without getting blown to pieces. The French papers said they went at night, but Christ, with all those plane detectors and things, I don't see how they did it."

It's this way.

"I met a guy just before our company was transferred up here from the Italian border. Dutch said he claimed he knew one of the fellows and he said their plane had a silent motor that didn't make any more noise than an electric razor. He said they worked on the motor secretly. Nobody knew about it, not even the government. I guess they bought a plane and installed this new motor and then they took off across the ocean. This guy I met said they landed on one of the Orkeny Islands and played like they were American flyers. They had faked papers and the Britishers took them for—"

"That ain't the way I heard it," Pierre broke in. "I heard the government fixed them up with that new plane and sent them over to England where they were supposed to try from. I heard those kids went to see the president about doing the stunt and he balked at the idea for a while but he came around after he saw that maybe with Hitler out of the way, the Germans wouldn't fight anymore. He was dead wrong though. It just made them Nazis sorer than ever and Goering took over just where Hitler left off. From what they say he's doing a better job than the Old Boy did. At least we ain't pushing ahead as fast as we were six months ago when Hitler was still running things instead of sitting in Alcatraz waiting to be shot."

This guy was saying.

"Well, this guy I was talking to seemed to know his stuff," Dutch continued, "and he claims it was this way. They flew this plane over to them islands without anybody knowing about it. They had these faked papers and uniforms and played like they were lost. Said they were doing reconnaissance flights over northern Belgium and a storm came up that made them lose their way. Well, the Britishers let them fill up their tanks and gave 'em something to eat, then they took off heading straight for Germany."

"Aw, hell, those Tommies might be dumb, but they ain't that dumb," Pierre exclaimed.

"That's what I say," Frank said. "Okay, you guys are so smart. But this buddle I was talking to in the hospital said they took off in the evening and got to Germany about two in the morning. Somehow they found this country place where Hitler was staying. It was storming to beat the devil and rain was falling by the barrel. The guards were sitting in out of the rain and didn't hear the plane when they finally set it down behind a bunch of trees."

They sneaked up.

"Two of them stayed in the plane while the other two went sneaking around the house looking for a way in. From what this guy told me, they looked in a window and there Der Fueher was sitting in front of the fireplace with a couple guards at the door. For some reason the guards left and the Old Boy was left alone, so these two college kids jimmied the window open; and one of them crawled in while the other stayed outside to watch. I guess Hitler was dozing a bit and didn't hear the guy come in. There wasn't anything to it then. He just conked him on the head with his pistol and drug him out the window. They finally got to the palace but had to kill a couple guards to do it. When they took off the rest of the guards saw them and

See WAR, page 6.)

## Alice was 'The Third Sister'

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At thirty-five she looked like fifty

By Carol Wheeler.

Miss Alice began at five to prepare supper. The bare little kitchen was shadowy in the early winter dusk, but she put off turning on the light as long as possible. She heard a sound at the door, and opened it to Peter, fat blue cat with fur ruffled from cold and wind, and eyes greedy as he mewed for milk. Alice spread a linen cloth on the small table, sliced the bread and spice cake, and put the kettle on for tea. Louise would be closing the shop soon now, she reflected. Their rooms were behind her sister Louise's odd, dusty little notion store. She heard the bell over the door in the shop tinkle and knew that Emily was back from Ladies' Aid. She prepared the tea and placed the creamed potatoes and fried ham upon the table. Louise and Emily came in from the shop, Louise heavy and placid in her dark dress, Emily still in coat and hat, talking nervously.

Vices and men.

"...and Mrs. Carlson said he did it deliberately. Deliberately."

"Did what, dear," from Alice by way of greeting.

"Jimmy Connors taught Ann Bennett to smoke. Deliberately. She's only seventeen, and he's twenty-two. Everyone says they're engaged, but you can't tell. Since he's been away at college he's picked up some wild ways, I guess. Why Mrs. Carlson says she saw him only the other night, cold as it was. "More and more and more. Alice thought her head would surely split. Every night it was like this, with Emily dispensing the latest gossip and Louise, pompous, encouraging her.

Somehow supper was thru, and she could finish the dishes. Her head ached a little, and her feet were tired. She dreaded going into the box-like living room where her sisters spent their maiden evenings. She had learned them by rote. Louise would work on her accounts, perhaps write a letter to some obscure relative. Emily would recite gossip incessantly, with her ever moist blue eyes gleaming brightly behind her black ribboned spectacles, and her hands busy with crochet. At ten one sister would put up her pen, the other her needles, and off to bed they'd go.

To get away.

Alice wiped her hands and took off her apron. "I can take back those library books," she thought, suddenly grateful to get away. She limped to her room, smoothed her hair, and put on a drab little coat and hat. She stopped by the door of the living room to tell her

sisters she was going to the library. They merely nodded when she spoke.

The night was clear; the wind had gone down. The street lights glowed forlornly down the empty blocks. Alice took the long way to the library. She enjoyed the quiet stars and the cold air against her face. She felt almost young, and no longer alone.

The library was warm and brightly lighted. Alice returned her books, and browsed about a bit awkwardly, hating to leave. She finally selected two books, checked them out, and smiled (See THIRD SISTER, page 6.)

## He talked amazingly well for a corpse and I had to interview him

By Don Bower.

"And I died."

"My dear fellow, I insist that you could not have died." I was just a little tipsy, and I knew darned well that two things were wrong. I knew this guy couldn't be dead, and I knew that if he was he couldn't be telling me about it.

"My dear fellow, for an hour and many minutes I have been listening to you, and I have concluded that you do not know what you are talking about."

"Listen, mister," he says. "You're a reporter. Fine. I wanted to give you a break. I wanted to let you have the biggest scoop in history. I wanted you to interview a corpse." He talked in an amazingly clear voice for a corpse. Even with the six Collins he'd had—on me. But I wasn't convinced. It wasn't logical, and I wasn't the guy to believe it.

Interview with a corpse.

"Sure," I said, "you want me to have a scoop. Thanks. This would be the biggest scoop I ever had. Only trouble is, it'd be the last." Our conversation had been moving in that same circle for quite a while, and it was 3 a. m., and I had a wife, and she had a temper, and I had better get home. Maybe in the movies reporters can stay out all night, but I wasn't in the movies. And although my wife was a very understanding woman, I had to have another drink before I was convinced she would believe this tale.

"Now listen, Scoop," the corpse yelled at me. He decided that I should be Scoop because of the

scoop that he was going to help me scoop. "I have decided that you don't believe me. I just read your mind—corpses are able to do that—and you were thinking that I was lying to you. It's a lucky thing I'm an understanding spirit, or I would scam back to my grave and leave you high and dry. But being an understanding guy, I will prove to you that I am a ghost. Bartender, Mr. Scoop wants me to have another drink."

This guy's batty.

Hell, I thought, this guy is bats. I don't know why, unless I did have one drink that I shouldn't have, I stayed and listened to him. Besides, it was costing me money. But I decided to let him prove to me that he was a ghost. "How can you prove it?" I says.

"Well, I'll take you out to my grave."

I wasn't in the mood to go to any grave. Particularly to the one this guy was supposed to occupy. It was raining out, and I had a wife. This wasn't the reason it was raining, but it would be a reason for her reigning—blows on me. Besides, graveyards are not my idea of pleasant places to be. Not at three in the morning. The last drink did it. Next thing I knew I was in my roadster sitting beside this talkative corpse.

Changed address.

"We won't have to dig up my grave. I moved to a vault shortly after I died. Hell, I thought, why spend all day in that cheap coffin? The old boy who was in the vault was too feeble to argue, so we changed places."

## He was a neighbor of John Dillinger

I had quit talking. I was whistling—or trying to. It was cold, I guess—at least my teeth were chattering. I was darn sure I didn't want to visit any vault. I wanted to get home to my wife. I never realized how nice my wife was. The wind was blowing on my face, and a couple of Collins wore off. I began to get scared—more scared. But I kept going. He told me where to go, and I went.

The graveyard was in the country. I knew it would be. Not only my teeth were chattering now. My whole body was chattering. Why was it me who got into things like this? Thousands of reporters, and I get to interview a corpse.

Pals with Dillinger.

"Buck up, Scoop. I'll soon show you where I live and you'll have your scoop. Old John Dillinger hangs around my place too. Maybe he's got something to say to the press."

Jeez, I was scared! My hands were frozen on the wheel, and I couldn't turn back. Why was this guy so damned unpleasant? The graveyard loomed ahead. The gravestones stood out in the darkness. They reflected the light of the moon. Only there wasn't any moon!

We stopped. He got out. I got out. He walked to the gate. Then he went through it. I didn't. I turned around. A dark object loomed up behind me. It had eyes a foot in diameter. They glowed. They were white, and didn't have any pupils. It was my car.

I got in. I went home. I told my wife about it. And then I died.

"THOSE WERE THE DAYS"

The rip-roarin' story of the days when Dad went to college!

STUART TOMORROW!