

## A MORALIST IN THE ARMY

THREE SOLDIERS. By John Dos Passos. 12mo. 433 pages. George H. Doran Company. \$2.

**N**UNC demum redit animus. . . . Pauci, ut ita dixerim, non modo aliorum, sed etiam nostri superstites sumus; exemptis e media vita tot annis, quibus iuvenes ad senectutem. . . . per silentium venimus."

For those of us who are not in Leavenworth *senectutem* is a little strong. During several years we were silenced right enough, but the war is over and we are not all middle-aged yet. If there were still any doubt about its being over, the Doran publication of this book about the army by Mr Dos Passos should settle the question. Other people here have dared to cock an eye at the old monster; Mr Dos Passos inspects him composedly and at his leisure. He shows that there is no longer any reason for American books about the war being worse than books about other things.

He writes much about private soldiers, and very little about officers whom he treats as a species of wild animal, distinct from mankind. What he tells of the officers has distressed Mr Coningsby Dawson but it is not particularly atrocious; it was no secret except in the newspapers. It is not for what they did after becoming officers that he judges them, it is for having allowed themselves to become officers in the first place. Charitable or uncharitable, they put themselves outside human consideration; at a time of public misfortune they sold themselves to the engine of misfortune. This may seem an odd notion to-day, but in 1917 when the war was expected to last five or ten years longer, it was not unusual. Suppose whenever you saw a man with a piece of metal attached to his shoulder, your liver turned over, your eyes stared into his, and your right hand flew to your hat brim at an angle of approximately 45°. Suppose that although a good soldier (most were) you had never quite got the nobility of it all into your thick head. You might very well have learned to dislike men with metal on their shoulders and you would have decided either to become one yourself as quickly as pos-

sible or you would have said with Mr Dos Passos' hero: they'll never make that sort of monkey out of me. Certainly there were a surprising number of soldiers, educated and uneducated, who refused all chances of promotion, who insisted on retaining, in the face of "all these pompous words: detachment, battalion, commanding officer," the decent status of an individual in the soup. And it is from their point of view that this story is written.

Like novels by Zola or Frank Norris, *Three Soldiers* is frankly a book with a thesis; it is planned in divisions: *Making the Mould*, *The Metal Cools*, *Machines*, *Rust*. Three principal characters and a multitude of minor ones are seen through the process. Fuselli is perhaps the most clearly drawn; docile, stupid, with a pathetic desire to make good, to keep in right, swallowing whatever his superiors choose to tell him, asking "where do you get that stuff?" of a man who says that the Germans notified hospitals before bombarding them, he is the typical parrot who was everywhere. Chrisfield from Indiana talks like a Southerner and "doesn't give a hoot in hell what they do." Of the details of army life we are spared only what the publisher was obliged to spare us. At intervals of six or seven pages a paragraph orients the reader in all five senses; then vividly and often beautifully an abominable little adventure in routine is presented. Somebody is seasick, gets drunk, takes a swim in the river; men drill, men desert, disobey orders and get away with it or do not get away with it; girls oblige; officers and Y men trail a more poignant humiliation across the scene. It is done with descriptive flourishes but without sarcasm. The author does not need to be ironical. He sits still, and the unforgettable idiocy of everybody in sight supplies the irony:

"As he was leaving the hut (after a Y. M. C. A. movie of German atrocities) pressed in a tight stream of soldiers moving towards the door, Andrews heard a man say:

'I never raped a woman in my life, but by God, I'm going to. I'd give a lot to rape some of those goddam German women.'

'I hate 'em too,' came another voice, 'men, women, children and unborn children. They're either jackasses or full of the lust for power like their rulers are, to let themselves be governed by a bunch of warlords like that.'

'Ah'd lahk te cepture a German officer an' make him shine ma

boots an' then shoot him dead,' said Chris to Andrews as they walked down the long row towards their barracks.

'You would?'

'But Ah'd a damn side rather shoot somebody else Ah know,' went on Chris intensely. 'Don't stay far from here either. An' Ah'll do it too, if he don't let off pickin' on me.' "

John Andrews, the third soldier, is an educated young man, who like almost all educated young Americans thinks and feels in terms of foreign literature (in this case Flaubert). The last third of the book is devoted mostly to his experiences in Paris, still a soldier but studying at the Sorbonne. Women, or the shadows which serve as women in the mind of a young man (Geneviève Rod begins to exist towards the end) enter the story. The bootlicking intrigues necessary to getting loose from the rusty machine, irrevocably turn his stomach. He deserts, throws away his uniform, and finally gets caught by M. P.'s with automatic pistols who presumably beat him to a pulp and see him to Leavenworth for twenty years. If the book had ended with an appeal for contributions to get him out of jail, contributions would have been forthcoming.

In comparison with the first part of the book, however, this last third seems nightmarish, almost allegorical, a return to the more sentimental manner of *One Man's Initiation*. What makes *Three Soldiers* so indubitably count is its story of the army, its concentration of the rancours of countless individuals into something not at all mean or plaintive, the harmonious expression of a well-chewed rage.

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