

"Walk on the water"

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„WALK ON THE WATER“

In «Walk on the Water» (Farrar, Straus & Young; Signet) Ralph Leveridge has written an interesting first novel, in which he gives us a glimpse into the lives and behavior of nine soldiers in the Second World War. Although he devotes more space to the sergeant Hervey and his philosopher-buddy Cailini, his most important character is the boy Lorry Adams, who because of his mannerisms and girlish manner of speaking is dubbed «Lucy» by the other members of the squad while they are still in basic training. Although Adams knows he is «different» from the other boys, he has never indulged in any of the acts of homosexuality which they naturally attribute to him. And being physically weaker than the others, he is the butt of their insensitive latrine humor and consequently a desperately unhappy boy. Things change for him somewhat after a nocturnal talk with Bill Hervey, the first soldier he has met who treats him with respect, but who sympathetically probes into Adams' differences and, by assuring him that he is not the only one of his kind in the world, succeeds in giving the boy a measure of courage to go on living. Adams is naturally attracted to the dark haired, strangely homely Hervey, and his joy is nearly complete when the sergeant tells him he is going to have him transferred to his squad.

The first sign that Hervey's interest has awakened a new kind of self-respect in Adams is manifest the next morning when Tuthill, the most fiendish of Adams' tormentors, dumps him out of bed, throws his rifle at him and vilely berates him for not having cleaned it the night before. But this time Adams, conscious that Hervey is sitting up in bed watching him, grabs the rifle by the barrel and swings the butt with all his might, clipping Tuthill squarely on the side of the head. From then until the end of the book the author entwines the lives of Adams and Tuthill in various ways. The first incident is the night in the company recreation hall when Hervey urges Adams to play the piano. Adams has confided to Hervey that this is one of the things he really does well. Tuthill, a bandage still clinging to his jaw, is chording a few tunes and the boys are getting bored with his lack of skill. Adams approaches the piano diffidently and Tuthill gives way with bad grace. At this there is laughter around the room and Adams retreats into his shell, thinking the boys are making fun of him again. But he is at the piano, Hervey is watching and has faith in him, so he gives out with Gershwin. He gives them more and more, to their apparent delight, and almost overnight, just doing the thing he knows best and loves doing, Adams is accepted into the squad.

But he still can't accept himself. Overseas the squad fights in the steamy mud and filth of the Phillipine jungles and it is Adams who takes the biggest risks. He is the first out of the trench when the order is given to charge and the last to find a place of safety for himself when they get into a tough spot with the Japs. The boys wonder why he has no regard for his own safety. Some of the more callous ones think he is out to become some kind of hero. But Hervey knows Adams' disregard for his life stems from the stamp of disapproval put upon him by the

people of the small town in which he was brought up. Having been sheltered by a selfish mother and taught by her that he was different from other boys made him shy with his playmates. And when they reached the age when they began to experiment with sex and each other he felt ashamed and was afraid to be a party to any of the things the others did. As he turned inward upon himself he allowed his music to take the place of human contact and, since he loved music and became a good musician, he was looked upon with suspicion by the unfeeling so-called normal people of the town. All this he confided to Hervey the night they talked in the barracks and when Hervey wanted to know what his future held, Adams simply told him that the sooner death overtook him the better it would be for him. Later, when questioned by an officer as to why he did not allow himself to be given a medical discharge or failing that to be placed in Special Service where he could entertain the troops, the boy fought desperately to remain with the Infantry.

In the jungle the boys share foxholes, and because Adams is good with guns Hervey decides to put him with the gunner Tuthill, who to all intents and purposes is a literal Don Juan. According to him nearly every woman in wartime Washington was fair game for him; he had slept with them from one end of the capital to the other. But Hervey, who seems to understand everybody, is not too sold on this talk and before he puts Adams with Tuthill has a talk with him about the boy. Naturally Tuthill's attitude toward Adams is one of disdain for the «unfortunate» boy. Again Hervey is not taken in and he warns Tuthill that he wants no nonsense from him as far as Adams is concerned. With simulated wide-eyed innocence Tuthill, with a «who, me?» attitude, disavows any knowledge of what is on Hervey's mind.

Soon after this Hervey is wounded by an infiltrating Jap and is sent to a base hospital. Robins, not long married, his wife pregnant, is made squad leader and the whole squad suffers and misses Hervey's tough leadership. The sensitive Adams seems to suffer more than the others and Tuthill takes great pleasure in baiting him about the improbability of Hervey's return to the squad. At the same time he is conscious of his growing power over Adams. Not that he consciously senses that Adams is more and more physically attracted to him — he is too self-centered to give that a second thought. Isn't he the big shot who beats women down until they give in to him? Tuthill takes advantage of his power by sleeping the night watches while Adams stays awake. And they are nights of torture for Adams. He thinks of the gunner's hard, well-built body so close at hand, his slim, firm waist, his rounded buttocks and those brutal boot-clad feet. Sometimes the temptation seems too hard to bear. Why not touch him? Why not wake him the way he knows Tuthill would like to be awakened? Why not give in and have it over with? But he closes his eyes until the tears come and stays his shaking hand. Then one night it happens — not as Adams dreamed but the way Tuthill wanted it . . . It starts as both of them stand in the slimy mud against the side of the foxhole. Tuthill begins by rubbing his hand up and down Adams' back. Why does Adams shake? He is afraid of Tuthill, isn't he? The boy tries to fight off his excitement and tells Tuthill to stop, as he isn't like «that» any more. Tuthill spins him around, punches him in the

stomach, and before Adams can regain his breath grabs his genitals. In triumph Tuthill finds there is excitement there. Adams knows he is lost and he is glad even when Tuthill, through clenched teeth, urges him on, panting vile epithets at him as he goes to his doom. Next morning Adams is gone. Tuthill is alarmed and worried. He and Robins search the rear areas for footprints, but find none. Suddenly Tuthill sees marks leading into the jungle towards the other side and he quickly throws his body over them before the squad leader sees them. Adams has gone over to the enemy, for some crazy reason incomprehensible to Tuthill.

On the morning of Adams' disappearance the long-awaited orders to return to bivouac are received. Back of the lines the squad relaxes, but the Adams incident is not forgotten. Voss de Lainy, the lieutenant, questions Robins, but they come to no definite conclusions. Above all Tuthill has not forgotten Adams. In his daydreams he relives the incident and voluptuously masturbates as he lies on his stomach in his tent and recalls Adams' face in the light of the flares that night. But somewhere in the back of his mind is the fear that Hervey will return to the squad and come to the right conclusions.

In the meantime Hervey, at the base hospital, is having an affair with a WAC. Although it is one of those physical attractions fostered by desperation and lack of time, it is a tender and well-written interlude in this saga of mud and blood and violence. But inevitably Hervey must return to the front; a kind of fatalism seems to compel him to return to his men, and the parting between him and Norah is tragic but one of the accepted casualties of War.

Naturally most of the remaining men of the squad are overjoyed at Hervey's return. Especially Cailini. The lanky Italian-American has spent many a restless night pacing the rest camp, thinking. The reunion of the two buddies is emotionally restrained, for this is a friendship devoid of sexual attraction, but powerful ties bind the two men. That night Tuthill, alone in his pup tent, has just finished another orgy of sexual intoxication when he hears the shouts that herald Hervey's return. A cold chill replaces his warm relaxation and he withdraws into the farthest corner of his tent.

By the time the squad returns to action Hervey has heard many sides of the Adams affair and has drawn his own conclusions, as has Lt. de Lainy. While listening one night to Tuthill's bragging about his prowess with women he is suddenly struck by the parallel to the true Don Juan, a man apparently a great lover of women but who was satisfied by none of them and is correctly diagnosed as a homosexual. De Lainy reveals his discovery to no one but Hervey. One evening in the jungle Hervey confronts Tuthill with his observations on Adams' disappearance and Tuthill's part in it. His overwhelming contempt leaves Tuthill gasping, his wide-eyed innocence blown away as by a strong wind. At first Tuthill tries to put the blame entirely on Adams, but under Hervey's unbelieving fury admits the true facts. However in order to save some measure of face he throws up to Hervey the fact that *he* is also guilty, as he must have known how Adams felt about him and if he had given him the same satisfaction Adams would never have looked at Tuthill. This Hervey admits but does not excuse Tuthill for the brutal way he went

about the demolition of the boy and climaxes his tirade by pointing out to Tuthill that he really is the same way Adams was, but that he will never be anything but miserable because he can never have the tenderness that Adams had, nor the beauty. It is later disclosed that Adams, having been tortured by the Japs, is still alive but several fingers have been cut off in an effort to make him give away military secrets. Now that he is deprived of the only consolation he knows, music, death would be more welcome than ever to the boy.

Before he brings the book to its melodramatic close, the author throws in another sub-plot — the disillusioning of de Lainy, who is in love with a girl named March whom both he and Hervey knew in Washington and whom Hervey describes as a thing of glass, all shimmer but transparent. De Lainy, who has clung to the memory of March as a symbol of the woman he is to return to, receives a letter saying that she is married. On the eve of the battle which is to wipe out most of the squad Hervey brings a frightened Filipino girl to de Lainy, who, slightly mad following the defection of March, practically rapes her in a desolate field.

Next day the decimated squad is ordered to fight hand-to-hand against overwhelming odds in the city of San Fernando. One by one the men are killed by snipers or booby traps. Cailini, ever watchful for his idol Hervey, is caught unawares by a mortar shell. The next moment Hervey, screaming, «Wait for me, Bob!», is blown to his death as he rushes toward a machine-gun nest, his hands full of grenades. The Japs are wiped out but so is Hervey, and the few remaining, sorrowing men of his squad watch the mud close silently over the strewn pieces of his body.

The author, Ralph Leveridge, undertook quite a job when he mixed up his characters under stress of war and in their more relaxed moods. I think, on the whole, he brought the thing off very well. There are moments of beauty in some of the conversations of the men, especially between Hervey and Cailini in their philosophical discussions of people and their loneliness in this brutal world. Undoubtedly there are several biographical incidents in this book and they have served the author well in portraying the sensitive against the brutal which must always be present where heterogenous bodies of men are thrown together in circumstances unfamiliar to them in their ordinary lives.

J. W., U. S. A.

In Washington . . .

The State Department has announced that, since the new (Eisenhower) Administration began, it has rid itself of 21 homosexuals and other bad security risks. In one week, eight sexual deviates and five other security risks were «separated» from the service. Score since 1947: more than 325 homosexuals fired or forced to resign after the department found them bad risks.

Streichen Sie im Märzheft 1953 auf Seite 3, im dritten Abschnitt, in der zweitletzten Zeile das Wort «nicht», das sich sinnentstellend einschlich.