



THREE  
SOLDIERS

JOHN DOS PASSOS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY THE AUTHOR

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THREE SOLDIERS

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## INTRODUCTION

It is thirteen years since I finished writing this book. Reading it over to correct misprints in the original edition has not been exactly a comfortable task. The memory of the novel I wanted to write has not faded enough yet to make it easy to read the novel I did write. The memory of the spring of 1919 has not faded enough. Any spring is a time of overturn, but then Lenin was alive, the Seattle general strike had seemed the beginning of the flood instead of the beginning of the ebb, Americans in Paris were groggy with theatre and painting and music; Picasso was to rebuild the eye, Stravinski was cramming the Russian steppes into our ears, currents of energy seemed breaking out everywhere as young guys climbed out of their uniforms, imperial America was all shiny with the new idea of Ritz, in every direction the countries of the world stretched out starving and angry, ready for anything turbulent and new, whenever you went to the movies you saw Charlie Chaplin. The memory of the spring of 1919 has not faded enough yet to make the spring of 1932 any easier. It wasn't that today was any finer than it is now, it's perhaps that tomorrow seemed vaster; everybody knows that growing up is the process of pinching off the buds of tomorrow.

Most of us who were youngsters that spring have made our beds and lain in them; you wake up one morning and find that what was to have been a springboard into reality is a profession, the organization of your life that was to be an instrument to make you see more and clearer turns out to be blinders made according to a predestined pat-

tern, the boy who thought he was going to be a tramp turns out a nearsighted middleclass intellectual, (or a tramp; it's as bad either way). Professional deformations set in; the freeswimming young oyster fastens to the rock and grows a shell. What it amounts to is this: our beds have made us and the acutest action we can take is sit up on the edge of them and look around and think. They are our beds till we die.

Well you're a novelist. What of it? What are you doing it for? What excuse have you got for not being ashamed of yourself?

Not that there's any reason, I suppose, for being ashamed of the trade of novelist. A novel is a commodity that fulfills a certain need; people need to buy daydreams like they need to buy icecream or asperin or gin. They even need to buy a pinch of intellectual catnip now and then to liven up their thoughts, a few drops of poetry to stimulate their feelings. All you need to feel good about your work is to turn out the best commodity you can, play the luxury market and to hell with doubt.

The trouble is that mass production involves a change in the commodities produced that hasn't been worked out yet. In the middleages the mere setting down of the written word was a marvel, something of that marvel got into the words set down; in the renaissance the printing press suddenly opened up a continent more tremendous than America, sixteenth and seventeenth century writers are all on fire with it; now we have linotype, automatic typesetting machines, phototype processes that plaster the world from end to end with print. Certainly eighty percent of the inhabitants of the United States must read a column of print a day, if it's only in the tabloids and the Sears Roebuck catalogue. Somehow, just as machinemade shoes aren't as good as handmade shoes, the enormous quantity produced has resulted in diminished power in books. We're not men enough to run the machines we've made.

A machine's easy enough to run if you know what you want it to do; that's what it's made for. The perfection of the machinery of publication (I mean the presses; obviously smalltime boom finance has made a morass of the booktrade) ought to be a tremendous stimulant to good work. But first the writer must sit up on the edge of his bed and decide exactly what he's cramming all these words into print for; the girlishromantic gush about selfexpression that still fills the minds of newspaper critics and publishers' logrollers, emphatically won't do any more. Making a living by selling daydreams, sensations, packages of mental itchingpowders, is all right, but I think few men feel it's much of a life for a healthy adult. You can make money by it, sure, but even without the collapse of capitalism, profit tends to be a wornout motive, tending more and more to strangle on its own power and complexity. No producer, even the producer of the shoddiest five and ten cent store goods, can do much about money any more; the man who wants to play with the power of money has to go out after it straight, without any other interest. Writing for money is as silly as writing for self-expression. The nineteenth century brought us up to believe in the dollar as an absolute like the law of gravitation. History has riddled money value with a relativity more scary than Einstein's. The pulpwriter of today writes for a meal ticket, not for money.

What do you write for then? To convince people of something? That's preaching, and is part of the business of everybody who deals with words; not to admit that is to play with a gun and then blubber that you didn't know it was loaded. But outside of preaching I think there is such a thing as straight writing. A cabinet maker enjoys cutting a dovetail because he's a cabinetmaker; every type of work has its own vigor inherent in it. The mind of a generation is its speech. A writer makes aspects of that speech enduring by putting them in print. He whittles at

the words and phrases of today and makes of them forms to set the mind of tomorrow's generation. That's history. A writer who writes straight is the architect of history.

What I'm trying to get out is the difference in kind between the work of James Joyce, say, and that of any current dispenser of daydreams. It's not that Joyce produces for the highbrow and the other for the lowbrow trade, it's that Joyce is working with speech straight and so dominating the machine of production, while the daydream artist is merely feeding the machine, like a girl in a sausage factory shoving hunks of meat into the hopper. Whoever can run the machine runs it for all of us. Working with speech straight is vigorous absorbing devastating hopeless work, work that no man need be ashamed of.

You answer that Joyce is esoteric, only read by a few literary snobs, a luxury product like limited editions, without influence on the mass of ordinary newspaper readers. Well give him time. The power of writing is more likely to be exercised vertically through a century than horizontally over a year's sales. I don't mean either that Joyce is the only straight writer of our time, or that the influence of his powerful work hasn't already spread, diluted through other writers, into many a printed page of which the author never heard of *Ulysses*.

None of this would need saying if we didn't happen to belong to a country and an epoch of peculiar confusion. when the average man's susceptibility to print has been first enflamed by the misty sentimentality of school and college English teachers who substitute "good modern books" for the classics, and then atrophied by the bawling of publishers' barkers over every new piece of rubbish dished up between boards. We write today for the first American generation not brought up on the Bible, and nothing as yet has taken its place as a literary discipline.

These years of confusion, when everything has to be relabeled and catchwords lose their meaning from week

to week, may be the reader's poison, but they are the writer's meat. Today, though the future may not seem so gaily colored or full of clanging hopes as it was thirteen years ago when I quit work on this novel that should have been worked over so much more, we can at least meet events with our minds cleared of some of the romantic garbage that kept us from doing clear work then. Those of us who have lived through have seen these years strip the bunting off the great illusions of our time, we must deal with the raw structure of history now, we must deal with it quick, before it stamps us out.

JOHN DOS PASSOS.

Provincetown,  
June, 1932.



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PART ONE: MAKING THE MOULD

*“Les contemporains qui souffrent de certaines choses ne peuvent s'en souvenir qu'avec une horreur qui paralyse tout autre plaisir, même celui de lire un conte.”*

STENDHAL

## PART ONE: MAKING THE MOULD

### I

The company stood at attention, each man looking straight before him at the empty parade ground, where the cinder piles showed purple with evening. On the wind that smelt of barracks and disinfectant there was a faint greasiness of food cooking. At the other side of the wide field long lines of men shuffled slowly into the narrow wooden shanty that was the mess hall. Chins down, chests out, legs twitching and tired from the afternoon's drilling, the company stood at attention. Each man stared straight in front of him, some vacantly with resignation, some trying to amuse themselves by noting minutely every object in their field of vision,—the cinder piles, the long shadows of the barracks and mess halls where they could see men standing about, spitting, smoking, leaning against clapboard walls. Some of the men in line could hear their watches ticking in their pockets.

Someone moved, his feet making a crunching noise in the cinders.

The sergeant's voice snarled out: "You men are at attention. Quit yer wrigglin' there, you!"

The men nearest the offender looked at him out of the corners of their eyes.

Two officers, far out on the parade ground, were coming towards them. By their gestures and the way they walked, the men at attention could see that they were chatting about something that amused them. One of the

officers laughed boyishly, turned away and walked slowly back across the parade ground. The other, who was the lieutenant, came towards them smiling. As he approached his company, the smile left his lips and he advanced his chin, walking with heavy precise steps.

"Sergeant, you may dismiss the company." The lieutenant's voice was pitched in a hard staccato.

The sergeant's hand snapped up to salute like a block signal.

"Companee dis . . . missed," he sang out.

The row of men in khaki became a crowd of various individuals with dusty boots and dusty faces. Ten minutes later they lined up and marched in a column of fours to mess. A few red filaments of electric lights gave a dusty glow in the brownish obscurity where the long tables and benches and the board floors had a faint smell of garbage mingled with the smell of the disinfectant the tables had been washed off with after the last meal. The men, holding their oval mess kits in front of them, filed by the great tin buckets at the door, out of which meat and potatoes were splashed into each plate by a sweating K. P. in blue denims.

"Don't look so bad tonight," said Fuselli to the man opposite him as he hitched his sleeves up at the wrists and leaned over his steaming food. He was sturdy, with curly hair and full vigorous lips that he smacked hungrily as he ate.

"It ain't," said the pink flaxen-haired youth opposite him, who wore his broad-brimmed hat on the side of his head with a certain jauntiness.

"I got a pass tonight," said Fuselli, tilting his head vainly.

"Goin' to tear things up?"

"Man . . . I got a girl at home back in Frisco. She's a good kid."

"Yer right not to go with any of the girls in this god-

dam town. . . . They ain't clean, none of 'em. . . . That is if ye want to go overseas." The flaxen-haired youth leaned across the table earnestly.

"I'm goin' to git some more chow. Wait for me, will yer?" said Fuselli.

"What yer going to do down town?" asked the flaxen-haired youth when Fuselli came back.

"Dunno,—run round a bit an' go to the movies," he answered, filling his mouth with potato.

"Gawd, it's time fer retreat." They overheard a voice behind them.

Fuselli stuffed his mouth as full as he could and emptied the rest of his meal reluctantly into the garbage pail.

A few moments later he stood stiffly at attention in a khaki row that was one of hundreds of other khaki rows, identical, that filled all sides of the parade ground, while the bugle blew somewhere at the other end where the flag-pole was. Somehow it made him think of the man behind the desk in the office of the draft board who had said, handing him the papers sending him to camp, "I wish I was going with you," and had held out a white bony hand that Fuselli, after a moment's hesitation, had taken in his own stubby brown hand. The man had added fervently, "It must be grand, just grand, to feel the danger, the chance of being potted any minute. Good luck, young feller. . . . Good luck." Fuselli remembered unpleasantly his paper-white face and the greenish look of his bald head; but the words had made him stride out of the office sticking out his chest, brushing truculently past a group of men in the door. Even now the memory of it, mixing with the strains of the national anthem made him feel important, truculent.

"Squads right!" came an order. Crunch, crunch, crunch in the gravel. The companies were going back to their barracks. He wanted to smile but he didn't dare. He

wanted to smile because he had a pass till midnight, because in ten minutes he'd be outside the gates, outside the green fence and the sentries and the strands of barbed wire. Crunch, crunch, crunch; oh, they were so slow in getting back to the barracks and he was losing time, precious free minutes. "Hep, hep, hep," cried the sergeant, glaring down the ranks, with his aggressive bulldog expression, to where someone had fallen out of step.

The company stood at attention in the dusk. Fuselli was biting the inside of his lips with impatience. Minutes dragged by.

At last, as if reluctantly, the sergeant sang out:

"Dis . . . missed."

Fuselli hurried towards the gate, brandishing his pass with an important swagger.

Once out on the asphalt of the street, he looked down the long row of lawns and porches where violet arc lamps already contested the faint afterglow, drooping from their iron stalks far above the recently planted saplings of the avenue. He stood at the corner slouched against a telegraph pole, with the camp fence, surmounted by three strands of barbed wire, behind him, wondering which way he would go. This was a hell of a town anyway. And he used to think he wanted to travel round and see places.— "Home'll be good enough for me after this," he muttered. Walking down the long street towards the centre of town, where was the moving-picture show, he thought of his home, of the dark apartment on the ground floor of a seven-storey house where his aunt lived. "Gee, she used to cook swell," he murmured regretfully.

On a warm evening like this he would have stood round at the corner where the drugstore was, talking to fellows he knew, giggling when the girls who lived in the street, walking arm and arm, twined in couples or trios, passed by affecting ignorance of the glances that followed them. Or perhaps he would have gone walking with Al, who

worked in the same optical-goods store, down through the glaring streets of the theatre and restaurant quarter, or along the wharves and ferry slips, where they would have sat smoking and looking out over the dark purple harbor, with its winking lights and its moving ferries spilling swaying reflections in the water out of their square reddish-glowing windows. If they had been lucky they would have seen a liner come in through the Golden Gate, growing from a blur of light to a huge moving brilliance, like the front of a high-class theatre, that towered above the ferry boats. You could often hear the thump of the screw and the swish of the bow cutting the calm bay-water, and the sound of a band playing, that came alternately faint and loud. "When I git rich," Fuselli had liked to say to Al, "I'm goin' to take a trip on one of them liners."

"Yer dad come over from the old country in one, didn't he?" Al would ask.

"Oh, he came steerage. I'd stay at home if I had to do that. Man, first class for me, a cabin de lux, when I git rich."

But here he was in this town in the East, where he didn't know anybody and where there was no place to go but the movies.

"Lo, buddy," came a voice beside him. The tall youth who had sat opposite at mess was just catching up to him. "Goin' to the movies?"

"Yare, nauthin' else to do."

"Here's a rookie. Just got to camp this mornin'," said the tall youth, jerking his head in the direction of the man beside him.

"You'll like it. Ain't so bad as it seems at first," said Fuselli encouragingly.

"I was just telling him," said the other, "to be careful as hell not to get in wrong. If ye once get in wrong in this damn army . . . it's hell."



"You bet yer life . . . so they sent ye over w our company, did they, rookie? Ain't so bad. The sergeant's sort o' decent if ye're in right with him, but the lieutenant's a stinker. . . . Where you from?"

"New York," said the rookie, a little man of thirty with an ash-colored face and a shiny Jewish nose. "I'm in the clothing business there. I oughtn't to be drafted at all. It's an outrage. I'm consumptive." He spluttered in a feeble squeaky voice.

"They'll fix ye up, don't you fear," said the tall youth. "They'll make you so goddam well ye won't know yerself. Yer mother won't know ye, when you get home, rookie. . . . But you're in luck."

"Why?"

"Bein' from New York. The corporal, Tim Sidis, is from New York, an' all the New York fellers in the company got a graft with him."

"What kind of cigarettes d'ye smoke?" asked the tall youth.

"I don't smoke."

"Ye'd better learn. The corporal likes fancy ciggies and so does the sergeant; you jus' slip 'em each a butt now and then. May help ye to get in right with 'em."

"Don't do no good," said Fuselli. . . . "It's juss luck. But keep neat-like and smilin' and you'll get on all right. And if they start to ride ye, show fight. Ye've got to be hard boiled to git on in this army."

"Ye're goddam right," said the tall youth. "Don't let 'em ride yer. . . . What's yer name, rookie?"

"Eisenstein."

"This feller's name's Powers . . . Bill Powers. Mine's Fuselli. . . . Goin' to the movies, Mr. Eisenstein?"

"No, I'm trying to find a skirt." The little man leered wanly. "Glad to have got ackwainted."

"Goddam kike!" said Powers as Eisenstein walked off up a side street, planted, like the avenue, with saplings on