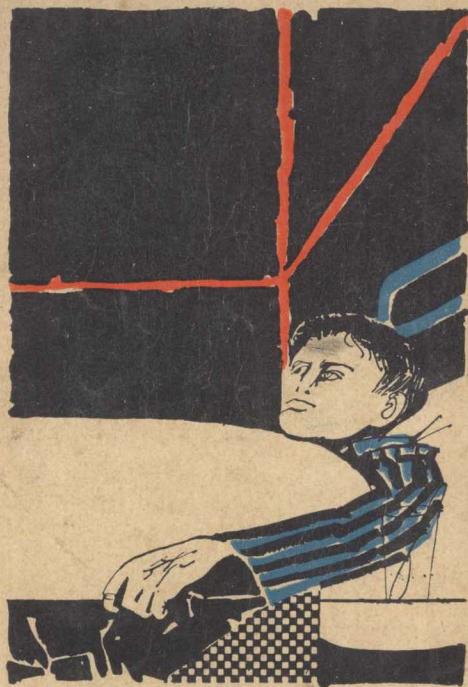


PENGUIN BOOKS

# THE VODI



JOHN  
BRAINE

3/6

# THE VODI

---

JOHN BRAINE

PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex  
AUSTRALIA: Penguin Books Pty Ltd, 762 Whitehorse Road,  
Mitcham, Victoria

---

First published by Eyre and Spottiswoode 1959  
Published in Penguin Books 1962

---

Copyright © John Braine, 1959

---

Made and printed in Great Britain  
by C. Nicholls & Company Ltd

This book is sold subject to the condition  
that it shall not, by way of trade, be lent,  
re-sold, hired out, or otherwise disposed  
of without the publisher's consent,  
in any form of binding or cover  
other than that in which  
it is published

FOR  
PAT, ANTHONY,  
AND POPPA



FROM his concrete dugout a general was watching the attempts of a raiding-party to capture a strongly defended hill. Through his binoculars he saw a figure detach itself from the mêlée and come running across to the dugout.

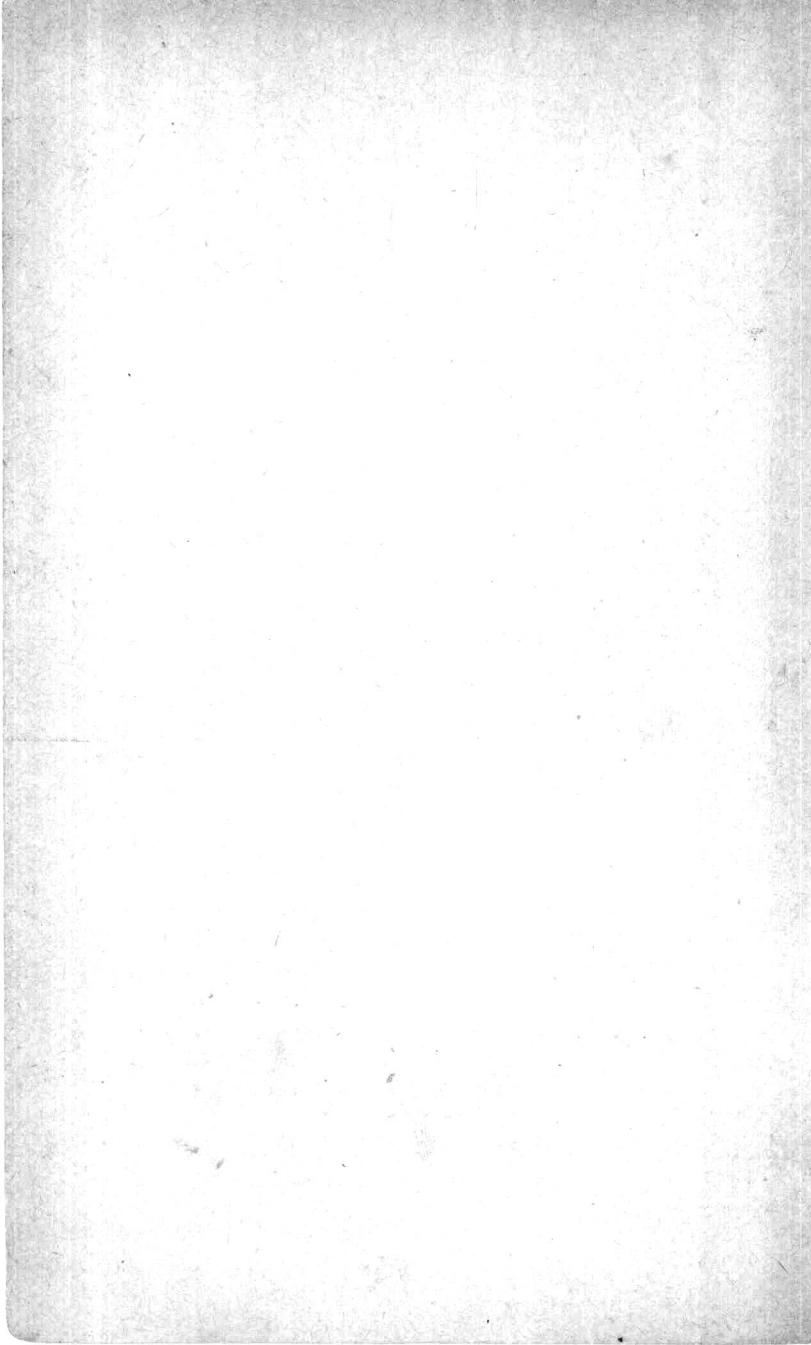
A few moments later a small private threw himself down the steps, sat on an ammunition-box, and lit a Woodbine.

'Well, my man,' the general said, impatiently, 'what message have you got for me?'

'I haven't any message,' the private said.

'No message? Then what are you doing here?' He pointed towards the hill. 'Return there immediately. That's where the fighting is.'

'Fighting be damned,' the private said. 'They're *killing* each other.'



原书缺页



原书缺页

# I

THIS morning – cold and fresh with a pale sun reluctantly administering sudden jabs of heat – Dick felt the whole burden of his illness like an enemy triumphantly straddling his chest. He looked at Rock and Percy and Peter through half-closed eyes; wishing that they would go away. They were free of the outside world or, at least, they were free to walk as far as the South Pines a quarter of a mile away; and while he had no desire to go there, he didn't want to be reminded of its existence. His country was his cubicle with its waxed floor, its clothes locker, bedside locker in white-enamelled steel, its steel and blue leather visitors' chair, and its silver-painted radiator.

He closed his eyes, then opened them again. It wasn't any good; he didn't feel awake in any true sense of the word and yet he couldn't sleep. The pill Doctor Redroe had given him last night had bludgeoned him into oblivion efficiently enough but now he felt thwarted of rest; eight hours of real sleep had been filched from him and would never be returned.

Peter pulled a letter from his pocket and started to read it, his lips moving. The envelope was pink and unstamped and when he took out the thick sheaf of paper there was a smell of perfume. It wasn't very good perfume – a factory chemist's rough sketch of the piercing freshness of lilies-of-the-valley – but, for a second, it enabled Dick to forget the taste of blood in the mouth. He looked at Peter, rapt in his private dream, with a derisive yet pitying fraternity: his black polo-neck sweater, a full size too large for him, made his peaked little face with its black lemur-staring eyes seem even younger and more defenceless.

Suddenly Percy snatched the letter. Holding it high above Peter's head he pretended to read from it. 'Dearest, sweetest

Peterkins, when I lie awake in my little narrow bed how I wish you were with me. You are so thin that there would be plenty of room for us both. . . .’

Peter leapt at him but Percy easily held him off, one big hand clutching the slack of the sweater like the scruff of a kitten. ‘Of course, Peterkins, we wouldn’t get much sleep—’

‘Give it back to me, you rotten devil,’ Peter shouted. ‘You know damn well it doesn’t say that. I’ll kick your big fat belly, I swear I will.’

Percy pushed him away, then put Dick’s bedside locker between them. ‘There’s worse to come,’ he said. ‘Oh my, I daren’t read this bit out . . .’

Tears came to Peter’s eyes, abruptly he turned his back.

‘Here you are, you clot,’ Percy said. ‘I was only joking.’

‘I’m fed up with your lousy jokes,’ Peter said. He walked out of the cubicle, his narrow shoulders shaking.

‘Why the hell can’t you leave the kid alone?’ Rock said. ‘He’s only sixteen.’

‘I told you, man, I was only having him on.’

‘Bloody well lay off him in future.’

Percy scowled. ‘Don’t you bloody well tell me what to do, chum.’

‘For God’s sake, shut up,’ Dick said, peevishly. ‘If you want to fight, go outside.’

The hard angles of Rock’s body relaxed.

‘We couldn’t fight anyway,’ he said. ‘Not with our P.P.s. Mind you, it’d break the monotony . . .’ He looked gloomily around the cubicle. ‘I hate the mornings,’ he said. ‘Think I’ll retire to my cubicle. Got anything to read, Dick?’

‘You can have those Penguins in the bottom of the clothes locker,’ Dick said.

‘They’re new,’ Rock said. ‘Have you read them all?’

‘I don’t want to read them.’

‘Please yourself’, Rock said, ‘I’ll bring them back.’

‘Don’t bring them back.’

‘That’s silly,’ Rock said. ‘Why don’t you want to read them? You used to be keen on reading—’

'Jesus God, shut up!' Dick shouted, then started to cough.

Sister Lardress bustled in, round-cheeked and small and bouncing. 'Shoo!' she said, 'let him have some rest. You should know better by now, Rock.'

'I'm borrowing some books,' Rock said.

'You do that,' she said. 'Take them and go away. It's a lovely spring morning – off with you quicksticks and do a dozen Circles before lunch. What are you waiting for?'

They trailed out sheepishly.

Sister Lardress straightened Dick's pillows and pushed back his bedside locker.

'You mustn't mind them,' she said gently. 'Time hangs very heavy on their hands.'

'I'm drama, I expect,' Dick said. 'They're waiting for me to die. I give their drab lives a bit of colour.'

At the word 'die' Sister Lardress's face drew as stern and disapproving as if he had uttered an obscenity.

'Don't be so *ridiculous*!' she said, sharply. 'You'll live till you're a hundred.'

'What for?'

'There's a thousand things to live for. You rest now. I've got work to do.'

Looking at her stiffly corseted back as she whisked out, Dick was suddenly and affectionately reminded of the wooden figures in the Noah's Ark his father had made him for his fourth birthday. Her skirts were so stiff that she gave the impression of being carved in one solid piece from waist to hem-line, like Mrs Noah. But it was no wooden figure which had seemed to be with him all the time he'd had his last haemorrhage, her healthy rosininess smudged with fatigue. How old would she be? Forty, perhaps. Not much more; in her plum-coloured topcoat and high-heeled shoes walking down the drive on her evening off to catch the Nedham bus, she looked considerably younger. Idly, he considered her possibilities as a woman. He was sitting in the Grey Lion with her on a fine summer's evening. They'd finished their

drinks; he was putting his hands on hers. That was enough; without saying anything they were outside, walking along the narrow path which led from the back door of the pub to Kellogg's Woods. He could smell the rankness of the elder-bushes beside the path, then the deader, blacker rankness of the stagnant pond at the entrance to the woods.

They were breasting the hillock past the pond now and were descending into a grove of oak trees. On the right, the hill rose steeply, pitted by hollows. The hollows were oddly uniform in shape and size, rectangular with steep sides, like graves for giants.

One of them had been a grave for Sheila Simmerton, too. They'd hanged Walter Perdwick for it twelve years ago at Tanbury Jail; he remembered Walter, shambling and gentle, his fair hair plastered straight down with a centre parting always at least forty-five degrees out of true. Walter wouldn't have been hanged, everyone said, if only he'd been married to Sheila; he was crazy about her, but she'd never be content with any one man.

He remembered her coming into the shop one day when he was serving. His voice was breaking then; he began his 'good-afternoon' in treble and finished it in bass.

She was wearing a blue flowered dress with pink frilled petticoat showing at the hem; that was the fashion then, though even if it hadn't been, it was the sort of fashion Sheila would have liked. She wasn't good-looking - her mouth was too big, her skin too dark, her breasts too small, and her hips too wide - but she was always lively, she crackled with femininity.

Walter, of course, wasn't the man for her; she said as much one evening in the Grey Lion. He was a keen motorist; cars were indeed his only topic of conversation.

'Walter's high-powered,' she said, 'but he has a crash gearbox.'

It had filtered through to Dick; it leapt to his mind that morning she came into the shop. The picture the phrase evoked was so disturbing that he gave her a packet of

St Bruno instead of the twenty Capstan she'd asked for. 'You know I don't smoke a pipe,' she said, putting her face forward so that he could smell the cachous on her breath. 'Are you in love, Dick?'

He blushed, her staring brown eyes upon him. He knew that she was measuring him up, if not for use at that very moment, then for some time in the future. He gave her the Capstan and nothing ever came of that moment of communication. A month later she lay strangled in Kellogg's Woods.

With an effort he took his mind back to Sister Lardress. She'd be wearing high-heeled shoes and would stumble over a tree-root. Ursula – her name was Ursula – Ursula would stumble and he'd take her arm – and then he dismissed her from his mind, made her a Noah's Ark figure again. It wasn't the thought of taking a woman through Kellogg's Woods which interested him; it was the thought of Kellogg's Woods.

He remembered Tom's excitement when Sheila's murder was discovered. Tom was of course one of the first to know.

'The Vodi's killed Sheila Simmertons!' he shouted. 'She's stark dead in Kellogg's Woods!'

'They're always killing people,' Dick said. He'd taken it as a joke; though the Vodi was, he knew, responsible for all murders and, indeed, for all crime, murder wasn't a real thing to him.

'They found her this morning,' Tom said. 'Just by the entrance to the North-West Passage. The place is swarming with coppers and they've roped the whole woods off.'

'You're kidding,' he said. Then he looked at Tom more closely and knew that he was serious. Tom was usually inclined towards dandyism; that morning his tie was half under his ear and he'd fastened all three buttons of his blazer, pulling it out of shape. And his bony, tough face which normally had an adult composure was disarranged too: he looked like a rather frightened little boy.

'I'm not kidding,' Tom said, taking a comb from his

pocket and restoring his hair to its normal smoothness with the aid of the Chocolat Menier mirror. 'All the Tanbury coppers are here, too. Old Relentless Rupert thinks he's died and gone to heaven. He's investigating like mad.'

'He's been sacked for not turning in the Chief Constable's share of the cocaine profits.'

'He's been reinstated,' Tom said without a moment's hesitation. 'Nelly started to like him again after he'd had Phil Hawkins beaten up. It wasn't just that they ruptured the poor little devil – he didn't even start the fight. He was trying to separate them.'

'That isn't what I'd heard,' Dick had said.

'Naturally. But it's what happened.'

'But is Sheila really dead ?'

'Stark naked and clawed to pieces.'

She hadn't been, actually; apart from the marks on her throat, and presumably the navy-blue tinge of her face, she looked as if she'd fallen asleep; and she was fully clothed, her limbs arranged with touching decency. Or so Ray Tomkins, the farm labourer who'd found her, said at the trial. But Tom and Dick decided that Ray, like everyone else at the trial, was under orders and what had happened was that the Vodi had tortured Sheila to death and then carried her body from the Kasbah to the hollow by the entrance to the North-West Passage.

'Who are they going to hang for it ?' he asked Tom.

'Probably the Vicar. They know that the last thing he'd do would be to be mixed up with a howwid *woman*.'

'Someone'll swear they saw him staggering out of the woods wild-eyed and covered with blood,' Dick said. 'Want an orangeade ? It's Saturday.'

On Saturday and no other day, Dick was allowed to issue hospitality to the extent of six soft drinks.

'Pineapple,' Tom said. Dick served him the drink, which he took standing up. There were no chairs by the soda-fountain; Dick's father said that he sold drinks and not seating accommodation.

Dick thought of the shop as it was then with a bitter melancholy: it had been redecorated in pillar-box red and white, the chequered black-and-white lino was still shiny, the chrome hadn't begun to peel from the soda-fountain and there were a hundred different kinds of sweets which you never saw now – Duncan's Vita-Milks, Callard and Bowser's Raspberry Noyeau, Nestlé's White Chocolate . . .

Tom, taking a meditative mouthful of pineappleade, said: 'I'd hate to swear some poor devil's life away. Even if he *had* done it.'

'It's not a question of them liking the job,' Dick said.

Tom knew as well as he did that the witnesses for the prosecution all had the choice between either obeying the police's orders or at some future date being hanged themselves. The police had the same choice too; everyone was acting under orders. It explained a lot of things, Dick thought bitterly.

Walter ran away – or rather drove away – in his black-and-cream S.S. Jaguar as soon as he saw the police car go past his house. He didn't go very far; they picked him up in a bar in Wakefield, pouring double brandies down his throat and shaking uncontrollably.

He let himself be arrested without any fuss; all that he said was: 'Let me finish my drink.'

'You see what I mean?' Tom said to Dick on the Sunday evening as they were walking down the High Street. 'He never even tried to get away. He knew the coppers'd have a description of his car and he knew they'd pin the murder on him the moment he scarpered. He's condemned himself to death, that's what.'

'Maybe they'll acquit him,' Dick said. 'Can't imagine poor old Walter harming anyone.'

He looked gloomily at the display of sports shirts in the Co-op window. It had been a fine day, but after all it was Sunday, with the sad bells ringing and the swings chained up in the Park. And Silbridge looked even worse in summer



– flaccid under the sun, drably naked in its embrace, without a shred of darkness to conceal or to dignify its scarred hills and low-browed houses and the smoking pyramids of its slag-heaps. He turned away from the window, surprised by the intensity of his hatred for the place.

‘They’ll only acquit him if he’s guilty and it’s a really clever murder,’ Tom said. ‘And then Nelly’ll look after him for the rest of his life. But poor old Walter’s just the sort of chap that Nelly doesn’t like.’

‘They’ll acquit poor old Walter,’ Dick feebly insisted; but Tom was fitting together the pieces of the jigsaw – or, perhaps, Dick thought, the jigsaw was assembling itself.

‘They’ve measured and weighed Walter already,’ Tom continued with relish. ‘And the chaplain’s been round to do his stuff because he’s due for his annual booze-up the day before the execution and he doesn’t want to profane so solemn an occasion with hiccups or diarrhoea. Mind you, he’ll send him a postcard – “THINKING OF YOU. GOD IS LOVE. CYRIL.” That’ll sustain Walter at the dreadful moment when they say: *Perdwick, the time has come to be very brave.*’

‘That’s what they say in France, you clot.’

‘They say it in England, too. Nelly thinks it’s more classy.’

It had been a child’s game; and like most child’s games it had been rigidly formalized. That Sunday they’d worked out everything that would happen. The summing-up had been taken out of the Home Office files – there were a hundred thousand there, with blank spaces left for names and dates and places, each representing a murder which Nelly intended to commit. They had been compiled in consultation with Nelly, who’d driven to London at a steady hundred, doubling the year’s road casualties in a single day; her Bugatti Royale was a wonderful car but, as its designer said, it was made to go and not to stop.

‘Poor old Sheila,’ Dick said. ‘She was a cutie, she really was. Led Walter the hell of a dance, though. You know that