Flight 501

GEORGE FULLEN

THE African sun was excessively brilliant and hot as Jack and I struggled toward the Operations Buildings, carrying his bulging and unwieldy barracks bag between us. We dropped the bag in front of the unlovely red building with a gasp of relief. Jack mopped his face and tugged at the necktie which he was so unaccustomed to wearing.

"I'm damned if I don't choose a cool day the next time I leave North Africa," he said.

"You're luckier than me," I said. "It'll certainly be a cold day in July when I leave this place."

I sat down on the bag and lit a cigarette. My stomach had felt squeamish for two days—since the orders for Jack to move had arrived—with a premonition of loneliness. I recognized that symptom. It had happened so many time before. So many people had come into my life to be in my affections for a short time, and then had moved on: the men in my Flight at school, the girl in St. Louis, countless others briefly met; and then, two of the three who had traveled so far with me; and now, Jack.

"Watch the bag while I check in," Jack said. I nodded and he went into the building. I sat and stared at the familiar planes, the runways, and the mountains in the distance. The salt flat was dry and glistened in the sun. The mountains, veiled by the dust-laden air, seemed vague, remote, and unreal. When I listened, I could hear the rattle of trucks on the highway, the clatter of typewriters and the businesslike voices from the offices behind me, and from the small building across the street, an occasional shrill protest from a poorly adjusted radio receiver.

Must I be friends with this? I asked myself. Must I now accept Africa as home? I wondered. It is all I have that I've known for more than six months.

And suddenly I was alarmed. Where were the smells that once had sickened me? Where were the sights I couldn't stand to see? They were still there, but they had disappeared. How long had it been since I had last practiced shallow breathing against the odors of dung and decay? How long since a diseased Arab had made me wince and squint? Long enough that I couldn't remember.

Jack interrupted my reverie: "Flight five-o-one takes off at eleven forty-five." He motioned me off the bag so he could tie the shipping tickets on it. Then he said: "Let's put this on the loading truck."

When we had accomplished that task, we sat on a bench for a minute without speaking. Then I said: "First Hank, then Dick, and now, you. By God, they've done a thorough job of it."

"Well, I always said I wanted to move on when Italy opened up, but, of course, I hoped you would move with me."

"After eighteen months together, our luck was due to run out."

"Expect nothing from the army and you won't be disappointed. You've been saying that to me ever since we met." His emotions, usually so carefully controlled, were more turbulent than mine. His Germanic pride in self-possession was breaking up. "Dammit, Bob, in the army you should never have friends, only acquaintances. But what can you do when you're thrown for so long with people you like?"

"Do you remember—it was almost exactly a year ago—when we got our orders to go to Jefferson Barracks? Just the four of us—you, Dick, Hank, and I. We thought we were being sent to the salt mines, and then it wasn't so bad. What a wonderful time we had in St. Louis."

"We were lucky. We passed through J. B. too fast to get any of the over-seas training."

And then the little bomb, which had been lying indigestible in the pit of my stomach, exploded, reopening old wounds. The faces marched past again, and many were in the parade whom superficial thought had forgotten before: the long discarded first love, the man who had been grandfather to me, the little Jewish playmate of my childhood. I groped for my crutch—a cigarette—and lit it, inhaling the elixir of life.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Eleven-thirty," Jack answered. Suddenly there seemed to be so much to say and so little time to say it. "We'll have that camping trip in the Adirondaks. The equipment is all stored away, just waiting for us. I wrote my folks you were coming and they said any of my army friends would be welcome any time."

"Sure, we'll see one another often after the war. Travel is in my blood and a thousand miles is no obstacle at all." I said it with assurance, but I needed a word from some God to assure me.

"Twenty-four hours on the Empire State Express."

"I'm sorry I didn't know you very well when we were in New York. I wish I could have met your folks."

A voice blasted from the loud-speaker: "Flight five-o-one loading now. All passengers report to Ramp Three."

"That's me! They're loading early," Jack said, starting toward the ramp while I trailed reluctantly behind. At the gate, he turned and said: "So long, Bob. Take care of yourself. Don't let the African dry rot get you."

"Sure," I answered. "Write as soon as you get settled. Maybe I'll be following you to Italy, soon."

We shook hands gravely. Jack swung his Musette bag over his shoulder and went through the gate. I turned and walked toward the Enlisted Men's Club, intending to get a beer, but I was stopped by the sudden realization that I was the sole remaining member of the beer drinking society. I would not drink alone. Instead, I went to the barracks, dressed, and caught the next truck to town. Yesterday, I had gone with Jack to bid it farewell. Today, I was going to greet it.