

JEFFREY J. LOUSTEAU

ALL
WE HAVE
TO
BELIEVE
IN

A Novel

An aerial photograph of the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, California, taken at dusk. The image shows the grand neoclassical architecture of the palace, including the central rotunda with its dome, the two large fountains in the foreground, and the surrounding colonnades. The sky is a deep purple and blue, with a few stars visible. The text is overlaid on the image in a clean, sans-serif font.

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Chapter 1

May 1919

He would remember it as a night gone terribly wrong – suspended in disbelief, then reaching for her sprawled unconscious at his feet, another casualty, one more innocent unprepared for the truth. What had she done to deserve it? For that matter, what had any of them done to deserve it? Clear answers would elude him, however, leaving only a nagging feeling of complicity...

The evening had begun with such promise, the world seemingly reborn as a sea breeze and the smell of jasmine filled the air with a sense of anticipation. From trolleys, touring cars, and horse-drawn carriages, guests had alighted at the Lombard Gate to the sounds of a stirring military tune in the distance. Ladies in diaphanous gowns were born along on the arms of men, a courtly procession on gravel paths lit by Japanese lanterns, culminating in a rose garden forecourt to the Parthenon, as reimagined in Columbia River Basin timber. White-gloved Marines stood at attention before the backlit colonnade, red, white, and blue bunting ran along the entablature, and a banner below the pediment read “Welcome Home Boys!”

‘Look, Edward,’ Constance exclaimed, ‘it’s simply magnificent!’

‘Grand,’ he said distractedly as they paused before the edifice that four years earlier had been the Oregon Pavilion for the Panama-Pacific Exposition. ‘I used to see it from my barracks,’ he remarked, ‘—hovering out there in the fog, just like my dreams of a classical education...’

‘Oh, but you’re a hero now – you’ve helped win the peace!’ Constance said, prompting them on through the rose garden and past the marine band.

Tall and rail-thin, his overseas cap covering a receding hairline, Edward Dooley knew he was no hero; he’d managed to survive, that was all. Delivered from the trenches the previous autumn and told he was free to pick up his life where he’d left off, he’d grown wary by the time the ferry

pulled up to the docks of San Francisco two weeks ago. Tearful reunions with family and friends since then, a host of accolades, and an exuberant parade down Market Street had left him unsettled. It was all happening so fast – there was no time for reflection, for taking stock. But knowing that after this Victory Ball he could put away his uniform for good, he had resolved to push his doldrums aside and make the most of the evening.

Sensing this in his silence, Constance squeezed his arm. ‘Let’s enjoy ourselves tonight, shall we, Edward? Let’s be glad it’s finally over, and that you’re home safe and sound...’

If he felt more guilty than fortunate to have made it home with merely a knee injury, he also knew that everybody had been through trauma of some sort lately – whether the war or the influenza epidemic – and the last thing he wanted was to feel like an outsider. With his sweetheart caught up in the festive atmosphere and looking so pretty in her new indigo gown, Edward guided her into the stream of guests climbing the steps at the base of the pavilion.

At the top landing they had just taken up a spot beside a column to look out for his parents when Constance noticed a group of civilians at the great doors nodding to them deferentially. Holding her clutch in her gloved hands, she nudged Edward with her elbow. ‘See how grateful everyone is for your service!’ she said, before returning a happy wave.

Edward looked on benignly a moment. Though the gulf between his experience overseas and what people at home wanted to believe disturbed him, the evening’s promise of catharsis buoyed his spirits. Placing his arm around her shoulder, he said, ‘It’s good to be home.’

Constance looked up at him, her blue eyes sparkling. ‘Oh, let’s go inside, Edward!’ she said excitedly, turning to the great doors, ‘Your parents will find us somehow!’

The mood in the hall was boisterous, the music of a popular minstrel band nearly drowned out by laughter and shouted conversations. Society ladies in heavy silk gowns and dowagers in somber wool suits lingered at the coat check, passing judgment on the young women who were gathered like exotic birds at the edge of the dance floor, eagerly awaiting the opening ceremony. Patriotic deprivations were a distant memory now, so eager were they to preview their stylish hats and slim-line chiffon frocks – Georgette crepe for Constance, with a light blue taffeta sash and matching bonnet.

Such festive colors were offset by military men in olive drab uniforms, business leaders and public officials in black tie. Smoke from cigars and cigarettes rose with the laughter, high above the bunting, balloons, and crystal chandeliers, swirling around the golden eagle atop the proscenium arch.

Edward didn't recognize many other soldiers – most men from his regiment, the 362nd, were already back in their hometowns across the Pacific Northwest. Steering Constance through the commotion, they made their way to the hospitality station at the north end of the hall, where they were relieved to link up with her brother as planned.

'It's a miracle we could find each other in this bedlam!' Morgan shouted as he shook Edward's hand and kissed his sister on the cheek.

'I had no idea it would be such a big deal,' Edward yelled back. 'I doubt the boys of the San Francisco corps have ever been assembled together in one room!'

Plucking two glasses of punch from the bar and handing them to Edward, Morgan said with a wink, 'These are the ones who made it back...'

Morgan Doherty had been a classmate of Edward's at Sacred Heart, the Christian Brothers high school where the aspiring merchant class of Irish ancestry sent their sons. Quick-witted but slight of stature, he'd taken to Edward immediately for what he mistook as aloofness (in fact, Edward had been shy, but with two older brothers he'd earned a pass with schoolyard bullies.) Despite differences in their stations, they'd become fast friends – they enjoyed discussing their favorite books, going to the pictures together, and afterward ambling through the lobbies of the city's opulent hotels. Edward came to know Constance, four years Morgan's junior and then under the tutelage of the nuns at Convent of the Blessed Sacrament, by spending many happy afternoons at the Doherty's genteel home.

Now seeing her delighted by all the pageantry, Edward grew nostalgic. Though he'd been compelled to quit high school after his family's business foundered, he was touched when Morgan had vowed not to let their friendship lapse; as for Constance, she'd looked up to Edward all the more for his sense of responsibility. The three had been inseparable at the Panama-Pacific Exposition, ending each day in the Court of the Universe, where Morgan, then in college, would recite poetry by the fountain and ignore their snickering. Reunited once again, Edward's blue-grey eyes twinkled as the three of them took in the splendor of the Victory Ball.

‘Look – there’s Mayor Rolph!’ Constance called out as a spotlight streaked across the dance floor, catching up to a dapper man in a top hat making his way to the stage. The musicians lurched from a ragtime number to a military drum roll as the Presidio Commandant, an officious, bespectacled man, tried in vain to call the crowd to order.

When a measure of decorum had descended over the gathering, the beaming mayor declared, ‘It is my honor to stand here on behalf of this great city...the Queen of the Pacific that was nearly vanquished just thirteen years ago...to recognize America’s ascendance in world affairs...and welcome home our heroic sons of San Francisco – I promise to be brief...’

The crowd erupted in delirious cheers, and as Mayor Rolph bowed to the military brass assembled on stage to his right, Morgan quipped, ‘I don’t recall Sunny Jim ever being brief.’ Constance giggled, while Edward surveyed the crowd, looking for his parents.

Holding his right hand aloft until the cheering had subsided, the mayor then proclaimed in his melodious baritone, ‘We bade you valiant men in uniform bon voyage when you set off for France...part of a vast army of deliverance whose deeds in the face of a relentless foe...turned the tide of battle...’ here he brought his fist down to the podium for emphasis, ‘and made as certain as fate the overwhelming victory won by Allied arms!’

A great roar rose up and shouts of ‘Hear! Hear!’ echoed in the rafters as the mayor waved majestically to the crowd.

After the army chaplain had invoked God’s blessing, the Mayor and the Commandant turned to the gigantic American Flag that formed the backdrop to the stage and tried leading the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance. But with their backs to the audience the effort faltered, and to keep the ceremony from unraveling altogether the Mayor quickly returned to the podium to present the Commandant with a proclamation from the city’s Board of Supervisors. Much of the exchange was drowned out by the chatter filling the hall, just as Edward spotted his mother, tall and imperious with a shock of white hair, coming through the crowd with his father in tow.

‘We can only hope things were more orderly overseas,’ Honora said dryly by way of greeting her son. She wore a grey wool suit with a high-waisted skirt, a cameo brooch on her white batiste blouse, and a black bonnet with a spray of heavy silk flowers better suited to a funeral. Edward’s father, James, red-faced and stooped, wore his Sunday best and took his son’s hand in both of his while mouthing his hellos to the Dohertys.

Alert to the pent-up enthusiasm in the hall, the mayor hastily declared the Victory Ball officially underway, whereupon the band launched into a raucous rendition of the “12th Street Rag.” With hundreds of giddy young couples spilling onto the dance floor, Constance handed her bonnet to Morgan and excitedly dragged Edward into the throng, where despite his bum knee he did his best to get in step with the music.

‘Given the occasion, you’d think she could summon a happier disposition,’ Edward said looking back to his parents, whose reaction to the rambunctious scene was a study in contrast. Honora appeared to disapprove, as she often did in large settings where she couldn’t dominate the atmosphere, while James seemed to have slipped her spell and looked positively jovial in Morgan’s company.

‘Your parents must be so proud of you, Edward,’ Constance ventured, ‘—the only one of their sons to ship off to the crusades.’

Edward let the remark pass, though he considered euphemisms like “crusades” and “noble cause” a way of sidestepping any mention of the horrors he’d experienced. ‘Too bad my brothers didn’t come tonight,’ he said, guiding Constance deeper into the crowd. ‘Colm wouldn’t give the 30th Regiment the satisfaction, and Walter thinks that because he was stationed here, the party isn’t for him.’ Drawing Constance close, he went on, ‘Anyhow, it’s hard to tell whether she’s proud of me or simply glad I’ll be gainfully employed again as of next week.’

Her cheek against his chest, Constance said, ‘She’ll have to accept that things are changing, Edward, and your brothers will have to start carrying their fair share of the load.’ He said nothing as the tune came to an end and a slow number started up. They danced in silence a minute before she added, ‘We have our own future to consider, after all...’

That their relationship had begun in friendship was important to Edward. Early on, they’d enjoyed a good-natured rivalry in board games and tennis, and would place nickel bets before a Chaplin picture to see who could maintain a straight face longer. She considered him very knowledgeable and enjoyed listening to him describe whatever he happened to be reading; in turn, he liked to make her laugh by comically reciting from Gibbons’ *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which was prominently displayed in the Doherty’s bookcase. As she grew older, Edward was pleased when she’d ask his opinion about something – the

choice of which handbag went with a certain outfit, a piano piece by Beethoven compared to one by Mozart, whether it was the Austro-Hungarians or the Germans who were to blame for the war in Europe. By the time she started high school the two were so well paired that no one was surprised when she asked him to her winter formal. Now, comforted by her familiar scent and swaying to “One Fleeting Hour” as they had many times before, Edward could almost imagine the past two years as having been a no more than a dream – that it made perfect sense to marry Constance, start a family, and embark on a prosperous career.

But everything was different now. He’d seen men suffer and die, men he’d gotten to know, here one minute, blown to bits the next. Doubts that she’d ever understand him, that he wasn’t the man for her, left him conflicted, wondering whether he could admit what needed to be said. He was reminded of a firefight in Belgium during the final week of the war. A member of his squad had gone down and in the heat of the moment Private Miller had confronted the Lieutenant – *You rushed it, Foster, you know damn well!* It was the right thing to say at the wrong time, but Miller didn’t give a damn; despite the consequences of insubordination, he’d stood his ground, and Edward had admired him for it.

Only now, as much as Edward wished he could confide his doubts to Constance, his sense of duty as a gentleman got the better of him and he held his tongue. The more they danced, the more disappointed he felt in himself, however, and the more resentful of Constance he became, until suddenly he blurted over her shoulder, ‘Tell me something, Con, you’d say overcoming adversity makes a person stronger, right?’

‘Sure, I suppose so,’ she replied.

Steering her around until they were face to face again, he abruptly stopped dancing, and said, ‘Well, I’ve only just gotten back, see, and with all that’s happened you can understand why I don’t want to rush things, can’t you?’

Embarrassed that others were beginning to stare, Constance pressed her head against his shoulder and resumed the dance. She didn’t doubt that his war experience must have been terrible, but couldn’t he see that it hadn’t been easy for her, either, what with the constant uncertainty over his well-being, all the sacrifices on the home front, fighting the horrible flu epidemic? While she’d known him to be moody at times, he’d always

managed to snap out of it – but since his return he seemed to be completely preoccupied with himself.

Suddenly bothered by the scratchy wool of his uniform, she pulled away. “I’m not the one rushing things, Edward,” she said curtly, ‘– seeing as how we’re practically *engaged* now...’

Edward blanched at the memory of his boorish behavior on their seaside outing a week ago, but before he could respond Constance was pulling him along on a jaunty new number. He was soon winded, lost in the crowd, a kaleidoscope of searing images flashing through his mind – foreign faces, wagon wheels caked with mud, great geysers of dirt and severed limbs, ramshackle railcars clattering by – and he could hear Constance saying, ‘We’re not getting any younger, you know...’ Blinking hard, he focused on her mouth, on the words, ‘You do love me, Edward, don’t you? Tell me you love me.’

‘I do, Con, sure I do,’ he managed to say, gasping for air, but with his knee aching and beads of sweat forming on his forehead, it was all he could do to grab her hand and pull her through the crowd to the edge of the dance floor.

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