

America

“America,” he said, “will lose the war. And Italy will win it”

“America is the strongest and most prosperous nation on earth,” Nately informed him with lofty fervor and dignity. “And the American fighting man is second to none.”

“Exactly,” agreed the old man pleasantly, with a hint of taunting amusement. “Italy, on the other hand, is one of the least prosperous nations on earth. And the Italian fighting man is probably second to all. And that’s exactly why my country is doing so well in this war while your country is doing so poorly.”

Nately guffawed with surprise, then blushed apologetically for his impoliteness. “I’m sorry I laughed at you,” he said sincerely, and he continued in a tone of respectful condescension. “But Italy was occupied by the Germans and is now being occupied by us. You don’t call that doing very well, do you?”

“But of course I do,” exclaimed the old man cheerfully. “The Germans are being driven out, and we are still here. In a few years you will be gone, too, and we will still be here. You see, Italy is really a very poor and weak country, and that’s what makes us so strong. Italian soldiers are not dying any more. But American and German soldiers are. I call that doing extremely well. Yes, I am quite certain that Italy will survive this war and still be in existence long after your own country has been destroyed.”

Nately could scarcely believe his ears. He had never heard such shocking blasphemies before, and he wondered with instinctive logic why G-men did not appear to lock the traitorous old man up. “America is not going to be destroyed” he shouted passionately.

“Never?” prodded the old man softly. “Well...” Nately faltered.

The old man laughed indulgently, holding in check a deeper, more explosive delight. His goading remained gentle. “Rome was destroyed, Greece was destroyed, Persia was destroyed, Spain was destroyed. All great countries are destroyed. Why not yours? How much longer do you really think your own country will last? Forever? Keep in mind that the earth itself is destined to be destroyed by the sun in twenty-five million years or so.”

Nately squirmed uncomfortably. “Well, forever is a long time, I guess.”

“A million years?” persisted the jeering old man with keen, sadistic zest. “A half million? The frog is almost five hundred million years old. Could you really say with much certainty that America, with all its strength and prosperity, with its fighting man that is second to none, and with its standard of living that is the highest in the world, will last as long as... the frog?”

“Well, frankly, I don’t know how long America is going to last,” he proceeded dauntlessly. “I suppose we can’t last forever if the world itself is going to be destroyed some day. But I do know

that we're going to survive and triumph for a long, long time."

"For how long?" mocked the profane old man with a gleam of malicious elation. "Not even as long as the frog?"

"Much longer than you or me," Nately blurted out lamely.

"Oh, is that all? That won't be very much longer then, considering that you're so gullible and brave and that I am already such an old, old man."

"How old are you?" Nately asked, growing intrigued and charmed with the old man in spite of himself.

"A hundred and seven." The old man chuckled heartily at Nately's look of chagrin. "I see you don't believe that either."

"I don't believe anything you tell me," Nately replied, with a bashful mitigating smile. "The only thing I do believe is that America is going to win the war."

"You put so much stock in *winning* wars," the grubby iniquitous old man scoffed. "The real trick lies in *losing* wars, in knowing which wars can be *lost*, Italy has been losing wars for centuries, and just see how splendidly we've done nonetheless. France wins wars and is in a continual state of crisis. Germany loses and prospers. Look at our own recent history. Italy won a war in Ethiopia and promptly stumbled into serious trouble. Victory gave us such insane delusions of grandeur that we helped start a world war we hadn't a chance of winning. But now that we are losing again, everything has taken a turn for the better, and we will certainly come out on top again if we succeed in being defeated."

Nately gaped at him in undisguised befuddlement. "Now I really don't understand what you're saying. You talk like a madman."

"But I live like a sane one. I was a fascist when Mussolini was on top, and I am an anti-fascist now that he has been deposed. I was fanatically pro-German when the Germans were here to protect us against the Americans, and now that the Americans are here to protect us against the Germans I am fanatically pro-American. I can assure you, my outraged young friend"—the old man's knowing, disdainful eyes shone even more effervescently as Nately's stuttering dismay increased—"that you and your country will have a no more loyal partisan in Italy than me—but only as long as you *remain* in Italy. "

"But," lately cried out in disbelief, "you're a turncoat! A time-server! A shameful, unscrupulous opportunist!"

"I am a hundred and seven years old," the old man reminded him suavely.

"Don't you have any principles?"

"Of course not."

"No morality?"

“Oh, I am a very moral man,” the villainous old man assured him with satiric seriousness, stroking the bare hip of a buxom black-haired girl with pretty dimples who had stretched herself out seductively on the other arm of his chair. He grinned at Nately sarcastically as he sat between both naked girls in smug and threadbare splendor, with a sovereign hand on each.

“I can’t believe it,” Nately remarked grudgingly, trying stubbornly not to watch him in relationship to the girls. “I simply can’t believe it.”

“But it’s all perfectly true. When the Germans marched into the city, I danced in the streets like a youthful ballerina and shouted, ‘*Heil Hitler!*’ until my lungs were hoarse. I even waved a small Nazi flag that I had snatched away from a beautiful little girl while her mother was looking the other way. When the Germans left the city, I rushed out to welcome the Americans with a bottle of excellent brandy and a basket of flowers. The brandy was for myself, of course, and the flowers were to sprinkle upon our liberators. There was a very stiff and stuffy old major riding in the first car, and I *bit* him squarely in the eye with a red rose. A marvelous shot! You should have seen him wince.”

Nately gasped and was on his feet with amazement, the blood draining from his cheeks. “Major — de Coverley!” he cried.

“Do you know him?” inquired the old man with delight. “What a charming coincidence !”

Nately was too astounded even to hear him. “*So you’ re* the one who wounded Major — de Coverley!” he exclaimed in horrified indignation. “How could you do such a thing?”

The fiendish old man was unperturbed. “How could I resist, yon mean. You should have seen the arrogant old bore, sitting there so sternly in that car like the Almighty Himself, with his big, rigid head and his foolish, solemn face. What a tempting target he made! I got him in the eye with an American Beauty rose. I thought that was most appropriate. Don’t you?”

“That was a *terrible* thing to do!” Nately shouted at him reproachfully. “A vicious and criminal thing! Major — de Coverley is our squadron executive officer!”

“Is he?” teased the unregenerate old man, pinching his pointy jaw gravely in a parody of repentance. “In that case, you must give me credit for being impartial. When the Germans rode in, I almost stabbed a robust young *Oberleutnant* to death with a sprig of edelweiss.”

Nately was appalled and bewildered by the abominable old man’s inability to perceive the enormity of his offense. “Don’t you realize what you’ve done?” he scolded vehemently. “Major — de Coverley is a noble and wonderful person, and everyone admires him. “

“He’s a silly old fool who really has no right acting like a silly young fool. Where is he today? Dead?”

Nately answered softly with somber awe. “Nobody knows. He seems to have disappeared.”

“You see? Imagine a man his age risking what little life he has left for something so absurd as

a country.”

Nately was instantly up in arms again. “There is nothing so absurd about risking your life for your country!” he declared.

“Isn’t there?” asked the old man. “What is a country? A country is a piece of land surrounded on all sides by boundaries, usually unnatural. Englishmen are dying for England, Americans are dying for America, Germans are dying for Germany, Russians are dying for Russia. There are now fifty or sixty countries fighting in this war. Surely so many countries can’t *all* be worth dying for.”

“Anything worth living for,” said Nately, “is worth dying for.”

“And anything worth dying for,” answered the sacrilegious old man, “is certainly worth living for. You know, you’re such a pure and naive young man that I almost feel sorry for you. How old are you? Twenty-five? Twenty-six?”

“Nineteen,” said Nately. “I’ll be twenty in January.”

“If you live.” The old man shook his head, wearing, for a moment, the same touchy, meditating frown of the fretful and disapproving old woman. “They are going to kill you if you don’t watch out, and I can see now that you are not going to watch out. Why don’t you use some sense and try to be more like me? You might live to be a hundred and seven, too.”

“Because it’s better to die on one’s feet than live on one’s knees,” Nately retorted with triumphant and lofty conviction. “I guess you’ve heard that saying before.”

“Yes, I certainly have,” mused the treacherous old man, smiling again. “But I’m afraid you have it backward. It is better to *live on one’s* feet than die on one’s knees. *That* is the way the saying goes.”

“Are you sure?” Nately asked with sober confusion. “It seems to make more sense my way.”

“No, it makes more sense my way. Ask your friends.”

(Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*)