

The Voyage of the Anchises

by Willa Cather *from One of Ours*

One of Ours is the story of Claude Wheeler, a Nebraska farmer who joins the U.S. Army during World War I. He is commissioned as a lieutenant, and he and his company head to Europe on a British troop ship Anchises. While on board, the troops are stricken with influenza, some of the millions what would suffer and die with that disease during the 1918 flu epidemic.

Dr. Trueman is the U.S. Army doctor. Claude is taking care of his cabin mate, Lt. Fanning, who is seriously ill with the flu.

After dinner Doctor Trueman came in and showed Claude how to give his patient an alcohol bath. "It's simply a question of whether you can keep up his strength. Don't try any of this greasy food they serve here. Give him a raw egg beaten up in the juice of an orange every two hours, night and day. Waken him out of his sleep when it's time, don't miss a single two-hour period. I'll write an order to your table steward, and you can beat the eggs up here in your cabin. Now I must go to the hospital. It's wonderful what those band boys are doing there. I begin to take some pride in the place. That big German has been asking for you. He's in a very bad way."

As there were no nurses on board, the Kansas band had taken over the hospital. They had been trained for stretcher and first aid work, and when they realized what was happening on the Anchises, the bandmaster came to the Doctor and offered the services of his men. He chose nurses and orderlies, divided them into night and day shifts.

When Claude went to see his Corporal, big Tannhauser did not recognize him. He was quite out of his head and was conversing with his own family in the language of his early childhood. The Kansas boys had singled him out for special attention. The mere fact that he kept talking in a tongue forbidden on the surface of the seas, made him seem more friendless and alone than the others.

From the hospital Claude went down into the hold where half-a-dozen of his company were lying ill. The hold was damp and musty as an old cellar, so steeped in the smells and leakage of innumerable dirty cargoes that it could not be made or kept clean. There was almost no ventilation, and the air was fetid with sickness and sweat and vomit. Two of the band boys were working in the stench and dirt, helping the stewards. Claude stayed to lend a hand until it was time to give Fanning his nourishment. He began to see that the wrist watch, which he had hitherto despised as effeminate and had carried in his pocket, might be a very useful article. After he had made Fanning swallow his egg, he piled all the available blankets on him and opened the port to give the cabin an airing. While the fresh wind blew in, he sat down on the edge of his berth and tried to collect his wits. What had become of those first days of golden weather, leisure and good-comradeship? The band concerts, the Lindsborg Quartette, the first excitement and novelty of being at sea: all that had gone by like a dream.

Questions

1. What do Claude's actions toward his cabin mate, Lt. Fannin, tell you about his character?
2. Tannhauser is said to speak in "the language of his early childhood." What language do you think Tannhauser is speaking, and why do you think it is "a tongue forbidden on the surface of the seas"?
3. What does *hitherto* mean here: "which he had hitherto despised"?
4. Influenza, or flu, is very contagious. How do you think being on board a crowded troop ship will affect those, like Claude, who are not sick yet?