

CLASSICS TO GO

WILLIWAW

A NOVEL



GORE VIDAL

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Chapter One

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SOMEONE turned on the radio in the wheelhouse. A loud and sentimental song awakened him. He lay there for a moment in his bunk and stared at the square window in the wall opposite him. A sea gull flew lazily by the window. He watched it glide back and forth until it was out of sight.

He yawned and became conscious of an ache behind his eyes. There had been a party, he remembered. He felt sick. The radio became louder as the door to his cabin opened. A brown Indian face looked in at him.

“Hey, Skipper, chow’s ready below.” The face vanished.

Slowly he got out of his bunk and onto the deck. He stood in front of the mirror. Cautiously he pressed his fingers against his eyelids and morbidly enjoyed the pain it gave him. He noticed his eyes were bloodshot and his face was grimy. He scowled at himself in the mirror. From the wheelhouse the sound of Negro music thudded painfully in his ears.

“Turn that damn thing off!” he shouted.

“O.K., Skipper,” his second mate’s voice answered. The music faded away and he began to dress. The second mate came into the cabin. “Quite a party, wasn’t it, Mr Evans?”

Evans grunted. “Some party. What time is it?”

The mate looked at his watch. “Six-twenty.”

Evans closed his eyes and began to count to himself: one, two—he had had four hours and thirty minutes of sleep. That was too little sleep. The mate was watching him. “You don’t look so good,” he said finally.

"I know it." He picked up his tie. "Anything new? Weather look all right?"

The mate sat down on the bunk and ran his hands through his hair. It was an irritating habit. His hair was long and the color of mouldering straw; when he relaxed he fingered it. On board a ship one noticed such things.

"Weather looks fine. A little wind from the south but not enough to hurt. We scraped some paint off the bow last night. I guess we were too close to that piling." He pushed back his hair and left it alone. Evans was glad of that.

"We'll have to paint the whole ship this month anyway." Evans buttoned the pockets of his olive-drab shirt. High-ranking officers were apt to criticize, even in the Aleutians. He pinned the Warrant Officer insignia on his collar. His hands shook.

Bervick watched him. "You really had some party, I guess."

"That's right. Joe's going back to the States on rotation. We were celebrating. It was some party all right." Evans rubbed his eyes. "Have you had chow yet, Bervick?"

The mate, Bervick, nodded. "I had it with the cooks. I've been around since five." He stood up. He was shorter than Evans and Evans was not tall. Bervick was lightly built; he had large gray Norwegian eyes, and there were many fine lines about his eyes. He was an old seaman at thirty.

"I think I'll go below now," said Evans. He stepped out of his cabin and into the wheelhouse, glancing automatically at the barometer. The needle pointed between Fair and Change; this was usual. He went below. At the end of the companionway, the doors to the engine room were open and the generator was going. The twin Diesel engines were silent. He went into the galley.

John Smith, the Indian cook, was kneading dough. He was a bad cook from southeastern Alaska. Cooks of any kind were scarce, though, and Evans was glad to have even this bad one.

“What’s new?” asked Evans, preparing to listen to Smitty’s many troubles.

“The new cook.” Smitty pointed to a fat man in a white apron gathering dishes in the dining salon.

“What’s wrong now?”

“I ask him to wash dishes last night. It was his turn, but he won’t do nothing like that. So I tell him what I think. I tell him off good, but he no listen. I seen everything now....” Smitty’s black eyes glittered as he talked. Evans stopped him.

“O.K. I’ll talk to him.” He went into the dining salon. Here two tables ran parallel to the bulkheads. One table was for the crew; the other for the ship’s officers and the engineers. The crew’s table was empty; only the Chief Engineer, Duval, sat at the other table.

“Morning, Skipper,” he said. He was an older man. His hair was gray and black in streaks. It was clipped very short. His nose was long and hooked and his mouth was wide but not pleasant. Duval was a New Orleans Frenchman.

“Good morning, Chief. Looks like everybody’s up early today.”

“Yeah, I guess they are at that.” The Chief cleared his throat. He waited for a comment. There was none. Then he remarked casually, “I guess it’s because they all heard we was going to Arunga. I guess that’s just a rumor.” He looked at his fork. Evans could see that he was anxious to know if they were leaving. The Chief would never ask a direct question, though.

The fat cook put a plate of eggs in front of Evans and poured him some black coffee. The cook's hand was unsteady and the coffee spilled on the table. The cook ignored the puddle of coffee, and went back into the galley.

Evans watched the brown liquid drip slowly off onto the deck. Dreamily he made patterns with his forefinger. He thought of Arunga island. Finally he said, "I wonder where they pick up rumors like that?"

"Just about anywhere," said the Chief. "They probably figured we was going there because that's our port's headquarters and the General's Adjutant is here and they say he's breaking his back to get back fast and that there aren't no planes flying out for a week. We're the only ship in the harbor that could take him to Arunga."

"That sounds pretty interesting," said Evans and he began to eat. Duval scowled and pushed back his chair from the table. He stood up and stretched himself. "Arunga's a nice trip anyway." He waited for a remark. Again there was none. "Think I'll go look at the engines."

Evans smiled as he left. Duval did not think highly of him. Evans was easily half the Chief Engineer's age and that meant trouble. The Chief thought that age was a substitute for both brains and experience; Evans could not like that idea. He knew, however, that he would eventually have to tell the Chief that they were leaving for Arunga.

Evans ate quickly. He noticed that the first mate's place was untouched. He would have to speak to him again about getting up earlier.

Breakfast over, he left the salon by the after door. He stood on the stern and breathed deeply. The sky was gray. A filmy haze hung over the harbor and there was no wind. The water of the harbor was like a dark glass. Overhead the sea

gulls darted about, looking for scraps on the water. A quiet day for winter in these islands.

Evans climbed over the starboard side and stepped down on the dock. There were two large warehouses on the dock. They were military and impermanent. Several power barges were moored near his ship and he would have to let his bow swing far out when they left; mechanically, he figured time and distance.

Longshoremen in soiled blue coveralls were loading the barges, and the various crews, civilians and soldiers mixed, were preparing to cast off for their day's work in the harbor.

A large wooden-faced Indian skipper shouted at Evans from the wheelhouse of one of the barges. Evans shouted back a jovial curse; then he turned and walked across the dock to the shore.

Andrefski Bay was the main harbor for this Aleutian island. The bay was well protected, and, though not large, there were no reefs or shallow places in the main part of the harbor. No trees grew on the island. The only vegetation was a coarse brown turf which furred the low hills that edged the bay. Beyond these low hills were high, sharp and pyramidal mountains, blotched with snow.

Evans looked at the mountains but did not see them. He had seen them many times before and they were of no interest to him now. He never noticed them. He thought of the trip to Arunga. A good trip to make, a long one, three days, that was the best thing about going. He had found that when they were too much in port everyone got a little bored and irritable. A change would be good now.

Someone called his name. He looked behind him. The second mate, Bervick, was hurrying toward him.

"Going over to the office, Skipper?" he asked, when he had caught up.

“That’s right. Going to pick up our orders.”

“Arunga?”

“Yes.” They walked on together.

The second mate was not wearing his Technical Sergeant’s stripes. Evans hoped the Adjutant would not mind. One could never tell about these Headquarters people. He would warn Bervick later.

They walked slowly along the black volcanic ash roadway. At various intervals there were wooden huts and warehouses. Between many of the buildings equipment was piled, waiting to be shipped out.

“It’s been almost a year since we was to Arunga,” remarked Bervick.

“That’s right.”

“Have we got some new charts?”

“We got them last fall, remember?”

“I guess I forgot.” A large truck went by them and they stood in the shallow gutter until it had passed.

“You seen the sheep woman lately?” asked Evans.

The sheep woman was the only woman on the island. She was a Canadian who helped run the sheep ranch in the interior. She had been on the island for several years, and, though middle-aged, stout, and reasonably virtuous, the rumors about her were damning. It was said that she charged fifty dollars for her services and everyone thought that that was too much.

Bervick shook his head. “I don’t know how she’s doing. O.K., I suppose. I’m saving up for when we hit the Big Harbor next. I don’t want nothing to do with her.”

Evans was interested. "Who've you got in mind at Big Harbor?"

"Olga."

"I thought she was the Chief's property."

Bervick shrugged. "That's what he says. She's a good girl."

"I suppose so."

"I like her. The Chief's just blowing."

"None of them are worth much trouble."

A light rain began to fall. The office was still a half a mile ahead of them. All the buildings of the port were, for the sake of protection, far apart.

"Damn it," muttered Evans, as the rain splattered in his face. A truck came up behind them. It stopped and they climbed into the back. Evans told the driver where they were going, then he turned to Bervick. "You better pick up the weather forecast today."

"I will. I think it'll be pretty good."

"Hard to say. This is funny weather."

The truck let them off at the Army Transport Service Office. The office was housed in a long, one-storied, gray building.

The outer room was large, and here four or five enlisted men were doing clerical work beneath fluorescent lights. The walls were decorated with posters warning against poison gas, faulty camouflage, and venereal disease.

One of the clerks spoke to Evans. "The Captain's waiting for you," he said.

"I think I'll go check with Weather," said Bervick. "I'll see you back to the boat."

"Fine." Evans walked down a corridor to the Captain's office.

A desk and three neat uncomfortable chairs furnished the room. On the walls were pictures of the President, several Generals, and several nudes. The nudes usually came down during inspections.

The Captain was sitting hunched over his desk. He was a heavy man with large features. He was smoking a pipe and talking at the same time to a Major who sat in one of the three uncomfortable chairs. They looked up as Evans entered.

"Hello there, Skipper," said the Captain and he took his pipe out of his mouth. "I want you to meet an old friend of mine, Major Barkison."

The Major stood up and shook hands with Evans. "Glad to know you, Mister...."

"Evans."

"Mister Evans. It looks as if you'll be pressed into service."

"Yes it does ... sir." He added the "sir" just in case.

"I hope the trip will be a calm one," remarked the Major with a smile.

"It should be." Evans relaxed. The Major seemed to be human.

Major Barkison was a West Pointer and quietly proud of the fact. Though not much over thirty he was already bald. He had a Roman nose, pale blue eyes, and a firm but small chin. He looked like the Duke of Wellington. Knowing this, he hoped that someone might someday mention the resemblance; no one ever did, though.

"Sit down here, Evans," said the Captain, pointing to one of the chairs. The Major and Evans both sat down. "We're sending you out on a little trip to Arunga. Out west where

the deer and submarines play.” He laughed heartily at his joke. Evans also laughed. The Major did not.

The Major said, “How long will the trip take you?”

“That’s hard to say.” Evans figured for a moment in his head. “Seventy hours is about average. We can’t tell until we know the weather.”

Barkison nodded and said nothing.

The Captain blew a smoke ring and watched it float ceilingward, his little eyes almost shut. “The weather reports are liable to be pretty lousy,” he said at last.

Barkison nodded again. “Yes, that’s right. That’s why I can’t fly out of here for at least a week. Everything’s grounded. That’s why I can’t get out of here. It is imperative that I get back to Headquarters.”

“The war would stop if you didn’t get back, wouldn’t it, Major?” The Captain said this jovially but Evans thought there was malice in what he said.

“What do you mean, Captain?” said the Major stiffly.

“Nothing at all, sir. I was just joking. A bad habit of ours here.” Evans smiled to himself. He knew that the Captain did not like regular army men. The Captain had been in the grain business and he was proud that he made more money than the men in the regular army. They did not understand business and the Captain did. This made a difference. The Major frowned.

“I have to get my reports in, you know. You understand that, of course. You know I would never have a boat sent out in weather like this unless it were important. This weather precludes air travel,” he added somewhat pompously, enjoying the word “preclude.” It had an official sound.

“Certainly, Major.” The Captain turned to Evans. “From what I gather the trip shouldn’t be too bad, a little rough perhaps, but then it usually is. You had better put into the Big Harbor tomorrow and get a weather briefing there. I got some cargo for them, too. I told the boys to load you up today.” He paused to chew on his pipe. “By the way,” he said in a different voice, “how do you feel after our little party last night?”

Evans grimaced. “Not very good. The stuff tasted like raisin jack.”

“You should know.” The Captain laughed loudly and winked. Barkison looked pained. He cleared his throat.

“I guess you people have a hard time getting liquor up here.” He tried to sound like one of the boys and failed.

“We manage.” The Captain chuckled.

The door opened. A young and pink-faced Lieutenant looked doubtfully about the room until he saw the Major.

“Come in, Lieutenant,” said the Major.

“Lieutenant Hodges, this is Mr Evans.” The two shook hands and sat down. The young Lieutenant was very solemn.

“Is there anything new on our leaving, sir?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Barkison. “Weather permitting, we’ll leave tomorrow morning. We should be back ... how long did you say?”

“Maybe three days, maybe less,” Evans answered.

“Isn’t that awfully long, sir? I mean we have to be back day after tomorrow.”

The Major shrugged. “Nothing we can do about it. There are no planes going out for an indefinite period.”

“Well,” the Captain stood up and Evans did the same, “you had better check on the weather and take water and do whatever else you have to do. You’ll definitely leave tomorrow morning and you’ll stop off at the Big Harbor. See you later today.” He turned to the Major. “If you’d like to move aboard tonight....”

“Oh no, never mind. We’ll move on tomorrow.”

“O.K., be seeing you, Evans.”

Evans muttered that he had been pleased to meet them and left the room. As he walked down the corridor he wondered if Bervick would be able to understand the weather chart. He decided not.

Outside, the rain had stopped. The wind was cooler and more brisk. Evans walked toward a half-barrel-shaped hut: the weather office. Ravens glided heavily around him, their black feathers glistening blue in the pale light. High above him he could make out an eagle flying northward.

Inside the weather office a Master Sergeant was handling the maps and charts. The weather officer had not come in yet.

“Hello, Mr Evans.”

“Hello, has Bervick been here?”

“Yes, he just now left. I think he’s gone to get some paint over to Supply.”

“I see. What’s the deal on the weather?”

The Sergeant shuffled his papers. “It’s hard to say. If the wind shifts around to the north, and it looks like it will, you’ll be fine.”

“Is there much wind outside the harbor?”

“There’s some.”

“Much wind? Thirty mile an hour? Is it more?”

“Damned if I can tell. You’re leaving tomorrow, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I’ll check with the Navy boys and get in touch with you later. This isn’t a good month for travelling the Chain.”

“I know. Is that the weather chart you got there?”

“Yes.” The Sergeant pushed the chart at him. Evans pretended to study it. Actually he knew very little about reading these charts. He knew from practical experience, though, that they were often wrong.

“It’ll probably be rough, Mr Evans.”

“That’s nothing new. You say Bervick’s at Supply?”

“I think so.”

“O.K., and thanks a lot. I’ll see you when you have some more dope.” Evans went out. He stood for a while watching the power barges, blunt-nosed and slab-like, move back and forth across the harbor. There were rumors that the port of Andrefski was to be closed soon and only the inland air base would be kept going. Many men had already been moved out, only a few hundred were left now. On the rocky, moonstone and agate littered beach, lumber was piled, waiting to be loaded on the Liberty ship, edged grayly against the main dock. This ship was the largest in the harbor and it made the other boats look like toys in a bathtub.

A jeep, with an awkward plywood body tacked onto it, rode by and splashed him with mud from the side of the road. Evans swore at the driver. Then he walked along the road, keeping close to the pebbled embankment. There was quite a lot of traffic at this time of day.

The Supply warehouse was large and gloomy and empty-looking. He walked around to the side of the building and went inside. He could hear Bervick's voice. "Come on, you can give us six gallons. Christ, you have the stuff piled up all around."

Another voice answered, "Sorry, three's all you get."

"Why that's...." Evans walked up to them. Bervick was holding three gallon cans of paint.

Evans grinned, "That'll do us fine, Bervick. Are you through here?"

"I guess so."

"Well, let's get on back to the ship." Bervick picked up two of the cans and Evans took the other.

A thin drizzle was beginning to cloud the air.

"Nice day," said Bervick.

"Yes, nice day. All days are nice here. We go to the Big Harbor tomorrow."

"And from there to Arunga?"

"That's right. We got some rank to carry."

"Who? I heard the Chaplain might come."

"That's a new one. I hadn't heard about him. We've got a Major who is the Adjutant at Arunga, and a Lieutenant."

"Any cargo?"

"Some for the Big Harbor. That's all."

They walked along the road, their feet grinding the wet cinder-like surface. Sea gulls circled high above them, a sign of bad weather according to the Indians. Among the sharp rocks the ravens croaked drearily. Silently they walked back to the ship.

Two of the men were hosing down the deck. The sea water from their hoses made a drumming sound as it shot across the decks.

Evans was surprised. "The first time they've ever done this without being told."

Bervick laughed, "The crew knew we were going before you did."

"They usually do."

They climbed aboard. Bervick went aft with the paint. Evans opened the door to the dining salon and stepped inside.

The Chief, sitting on one of the tables, was smoking a cigar. Down the companionway, Evans could see the two assistant engineers working on the auxiliary.

"What's new, Skipper?" asked Duval.

"Hello, Chief. Your boys pretty busy?"

"Yeah, getting ready for the big trip. Lucky we took fuel last week."

"It was."

"When we leaving?" The Chief asked one of his few direct questions.

"Tomorrow morning."

"Straight to Arunga, I suppose."

"No, we're going to the Big Harbor first. We go on from there."

"I guess I'll be able to see Olga then." The Chief grinned.

Evans looked at him. "What about Bervick?"

"What about him?" The Chief was not interested and they said nothing for a few moments. Then he said, "I hear the Chaplain'll be with us."

“So I’ve heard. I guess the Captain will tell me about it later.”

“Probably. I got to get to work.” The Chief slid off the table and walked toward the engine room. Evans could hear the sound of his voice as he talked with his assistants. Evans knew he was telling them that they were going west to Arunga as he had said they would. Evans walked into the galley. The cook, John Smith, was scrubbing pans. He was alone in the galley.

“How’s it going, Smitty? Where’s your helper?”

Smitty put down the kettle he was scrubbing. “Gone,” he said with suppressed drama. “I seen everything now. What does this guy do? Does this guy help in here? No. He go down and lay on his fat butt. I’m going to get off this boat. I seen everything. He won’t work, won’t do nothing....”

“I’ll talk to him, Smitty.” That was always a good promise to make. Smitty would be mad at something else the next day anyway. “By the way,” he added, “have you got enough rations to get us to Arunga? We’re going to have three passengers.”

Smitty gasped. His lean ugly brown face was contorted with grief. “I seen *everything* now.” He spoke softly as if he were praying. “I got no bread. I got no meat. I got no nothing now. How,” his voice rose to a wail, “how am I going to feed the crew? I make no bread on the water. They eat out of cans, that’s all.”

“Well, you work it out and get what you need. We’ll leave tomorrow at eight.”

Smitty muttered to himself. Evans went up to the wheelhouse.

Bervick was standing over the chart table: a chart of all the islands in the Aleutian Chain before him. He was squinting

thoughtfully and carefully measuring out a course.

“Think you can get us there?” asked Evans.

“What? Oh sure, I was just checking the old course. Last time we ran too close to shore off Kulak.”

“I remember. We’ll work out a course over at the Big Harbor.” The salt spray from the hoses splattered the wheelhouse windows. “That reminds me, you better get some water. We’re pretty low.”

“O.K.” Bervick put the chart in a drawer under the table and left the wheelhouse.

Evans looked out the window. He could think of nothing very important to be done before they sailed. They had fuel. Smitty would get rations. The charts were up to date. He rubbed his face to see if he needed a shave. He did.

Evans went into his cabin and turned on the water in his basin. He noticed that his eyes looked a little better, though they still hurt him. He sighed and tried to look at his profile in the glass. This he knew would exercise his eyes, also in the back of his mind he wondered if he might not be able to see his profile. He had seen it once in a tailor’s three-way mirror. He had been greatly interested, and he hoped vaguely that he might see it again sometime. Strange things like that obsessed people who had been to sea for a long time.

Someone turned on the radio. A deep sterile radio voice staccatoed in the air for a moment and was gone. The air was filled with static, and then the voice came back again. Evans could not make out what the voice was saying but he could guess from the tone that our “forces were smashing ahead on all fronts”: the usual thing. He was bored by the war.

Methodically he shaved himself. He wondered who had turned on the radio. Probably Martin, his first mate.

A light wisp of fog came into the room through the half-open window; quickly Evans shut it. He shivered. The cold was penetrating.

"I'm cold as gold is old," he muttered to himself. It was a jingle that went occasionally through his mind. For several years he had known it. Queer phrases and jingles often came to him when he had been too much alone. Sometimes they worried him. Evans often wondered if he might not be a little crazy. They say, though, that when you are crazy you never know it, he thought. There was consolation in that and he murmured again to himself, "I'm cold as gold is old." Then he finished shaving.

He looked much older than twenty-five, he noticed, looking at himself intently in the mirror. When he was eighteen he had worked alone in a lighthouse. He used often to look at himself in the mirror then. He felt less alone when he did that and the habit had stayed with him. He yawned and turned away from the mirror. Neatly he put his shaving equipment away, then he sat down at his desk and looked at the papers on it. Most of the papers were memorandums from the Headquarters. He pushed them to one side.

In his desk drawer was a quart of bourbon. He wondered if he should take a swallow, a small one, enough to take away the ache behind his eyes. Evans reached for the drawer. Before he could open it, Martin walked into the cabin. Martin never knocked.

"Good morning," said Evans and he tried to sound sarcastic.

"Hail to the Chief," said Martin, eying Evans' hand on the liquor drawer. "Starting in early, aren't you?"

"What do you mean? Oh, this," Evans withdrew his hand quickly. "I was just looking for something."

“So I see.” The first mate smiled, showing all his teeth. He was a year younger than Evans, but looked even younger than he was. He had a carefully studied collegiate manner though he had never been to a college. John Martin had been one of the numerous unpromising young actors in a New England stock company. He was dark and nearly handsome. His voice was deep, interesting and mocking. He knew nothing about being a mate.

“Did you just get up?” Evans asked, knowing that he had.

“Why yes—the party, you know. I felt I should sleep. The ravell’d sleeve, you know.” He spoke with a pseudo-British accent which he knew irritated Evans.

“Well, go get on down below and make sure they take water,” Evans snapped.

“Right you are, sir.”

“Can the funny stuff. We’re going to the Big Harbor tomorrow.”

“Any passengers?”

“Yes, the Adjutant at Arunga, a Lieutenant and the Chaplain.”

“That sounds gay. When’re we going to haul another group of USO girls?” Martin winked in what he would have called a roguish manner. Evans had once become too interested in a USO girl on tour.

Evans murmured, “Not for a while.” He turned away and played with the papers on his desk. He tried to think of something for Martin to do. “You might,” he finally said, “go see the Chaplain and find out when he’s coming aboard. Also, you’d better get hold of a copy of the special orders with his name on them. The Captain forgot to tell me he was going.”

“Fine.” Martin started to go. “By the way,” he said, and Evans knew and dreaded what he was going to say, “how do you feel after the party last night? You don’t look so good.”

“I feel awful. Now go get to work.”

Martin left and Evans rested his head on his arm. He felt tired. The ship was unusually still. Far away he could hear the rasping croak of a raven. He opened the desk drawer.

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John Martin walked into the galley.

“What’s on your mind, Smitty?” he asked. Martin was always polite with the men and Evans was not. The men liked Martin better and that was the main reason why Evans did not like him, or so Martin thought.

“Nothing on my mind. You want to eat something?”

“No thanks. I’ll just take a little of this.” He poured himself some pineapple juice from a large can. Smitty watched him drink it.

“What’s on for chow tonight?”

The Indian’s eyes gleamed. “Vienna sausage and that’s all I got. I have to go get rations for a whole week now. I haven’t got no time to make bread or nothing. That guy,” he pointed upward, “he tell me just today to get this stuff.”

“Well, that’s O.K., Smitty,” Martin murmured soothingly, as he left, “it’ll be all right.”

On deck he found two of the crew coiling the long black water hose.

“Pretty empty, wasn’t she?”

One of them nodded. He was a heavy blond fellow, a professional seaman. “Are we going out west?” he asked.