

The Passing-Out Parade

Anne Valery

A play about a group of ATS girls in the Second World War from their recruitment to their passing-out parade. In this scene Sergeant Joyce Pickering is instructing them in the salute. . . . Pickering is described 'In her 40's. Born in Worcestershire, she joined the ATS on the first day of the war as her father joined the army in 1914. Cares passionately for classical music; collects boxes but has nothing to put in them. Immaculately turned out and has dealt with such recruits many times before; always using the same mock gaiety, the same speech, peppering it with French phrases at times.'

Scene: Outside the Barrack Room.

Time: Early 1944.

The author suggests that the speech could be performed in your choice of dialect.

PICKERING (after saluting smartly to the departing CO and waiting until she is out of earshot turns to opposite direction and shouts to the recruits she is training). . . . Right, me anguished amateurs. You've just hobserved a salute, so let me start as I mean to go on – and on – and on. Forward, ten paces – march! (The GIRLS enter.) Halt. And face front. And (She demonstrates.) – stand – at – ease! I said 'stand!' Not disintegrate. Now you're to watch my every move as if your miserable lives depended on it, which they very well might! A recruit will – at all times, mark me – salute an hofficer. AT ALL TIMES do you hear me? Doesn't matter if you're starkers or on the bog. . . . (One of the GIRLS giggles.) Go on like that and you'll be laughing the other side of nowhere. So – when you see an hofficer – female or male – you salute. IS THAT CLEAR? . . . (Their answer is not loud enough or

correct. She cups her hand to her ear.) YES, SERGEANT, and let it ring in me ear like the last trump. (They shout this time. She smiles.) And now to the salute. . . . A salute is in three parts. . . . Each part to the count of three. Each part to the count of three. One, two, three – up. (Arm up.) One, two, three – hold. (Salutes.) Note the palm facing front, fingers stiff as stanchions. One, two, three – down. (Hand to side.) The more hobservant amongst you will have regard to the fact that the way my harm goes up is like a ruddy rainbow. Down it is stuck to my body as if drawn there by a magnet. (Banging her thumb against her skirt.) Thumbs down seams! Right! I will now demonstrate once again. And only the once. The longest way up, two three. Hold, two, three. The shortest way down, two, three. So – you will now follow my every miniscule move, shouting the numbers as if to Moscow, first marking yourselves by stretching arms out to both sides so you don't knock yourselves out – before I do. AND I MIGHT. Right then – ter!shun! And – mark. . . . (Watching them.) Crab! You are not the Ziegfield Follies about to high kick to kingdom come, so . . . uncoil yourself, girl! (She walks behind line of GIRLS observes a large gap in the line, and fuming, steps through it.) Forming a company of our own are we? Close up! (To whole line.) And . . . arms down! And prepare to salute, shouting the numbers . . . one, two, three, as you do so. . . . (Counting with them.) One, two, three . . . up. One, two, three . . . hold. One, two, three . . . down . . . (The GIRLS are terrible. Silence.) Yes, well, and so perhaps we'll have better luck calling our army numbers – starting with Crab. (Listens while all seven repeat their number.) What a little optimist I am! For your information we are not spotting puff-puff engine numbers, jolly though that might be. Oh dear me no. We are attempting to identify ourselves in a clear crisp manner. Do I make myself clear so that you will make yourselves crystal? . . . So, après moi, le deluge!