

JACK WOODVILLE LONDON



FRENCH
LETTERS

VIRGINIA'S WAR:
TIERRA TEXAS 1944

**FRENCH
LETTERS ©**



BOOK ONE

VIRGINIA'S WAR

Tierra, Texas 1944

A Novel, By
Jack Woodville London

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If Sandy had read the *Tierra Times* he might have figured out that he had no further need to fear Doc Pritchard. On the Sunday before Easter, between the story about the community egg hunt on the courthouse lawn and a column which began and ended with a list of Easter Services, there was an announcement:

Mr. Michael Sullivan wishes to announce that his daughter, Virginia Sullivan, of Tierra, and Captain Woodrow Wilson Hastings, a graduate of Tierra High School and the University of Texas Medical School at Galveston and now of the United States Army in Europe, entered into the holy state of matrimony before a justice of the peace in Clovis New Mexico during his leave over the Thanksgiving Holiday, November 25, 1943.

There was a ribbon and heart beneath the announcement.

Michael Sullivan, Poppy, *was* the *Tierra Times*. He had taken Doc Pritchard's phone call, then thought through the implications of his pregnant daughter and her soldier/doctor five thousand miles away in England. He decided it was a good thing and made several decisions about the couple's, and the town's, future. Two weeks later he published his announcement of their elopement, an imaginary union that was as much a surprise to his daughter as to the rest of the community.

Sandy may not have read the announcement but everyone else did.

Regardless of what might have been said at the beauty shop, the town congratulated Poppy and wished the happy couple well. Mrs. Tarlton and Shirley's mother, with visions of missed cakes and needlework dresses, clucked over the lost opportunity to stage a wedding, but their seed fell on thin soil. Others, keenly aware of Poppy Sullivan's encyclopedic knowledge of local wealth – who had spare blue ration coupons, a tire hidden in a loft, a cattle pen with more yearlings than reported to the OPA contractor, a farmer with one tractor and gasoline tanks for three – breathed a sigh of relief that no gifts were called for, at least not yet. For Poppy, it was business as usual. He composed the next edition of the *Times*, stopped in at the bank and the co-op to talk about cotton prices, and kept an eye on Bart's urges.

The two who didn't congratulate Poppy on his announcement were Virginia herself and Butch's sister Shirley.

Virginia had learned of her marriage to Will the same way she learned most things about their long-distance courtship – she read it when Bart tacked it to the bulletin board at the post office. Her first reaction had been disbelief. She pulled out the thumbtack and the wedding announcement, looked around the room to see who was watching, and stormed out. By the time she got to the newspaper office disbelief had turned to fury.

Her fury fell on deaf ears.

“What's done is done,” Poppy told her. “You did what you had to do so I

did what I had to do. You'd better learn to live with it – like I tell Bart, take the long view.”

“How dare you?”

“How dare I what? You are hereby married to Will. The paper says so. But,” and he paused long enough for her to recognize the familiar sign of Poppy’s threats, “if you want to go tell everyone in town that it was a misprint, well that’ll give them two things to talk about when you start to show. What’s done is done.”

He let the warning sink in. Who would people believe? Her or Poppy? And their own eyes. “And besides – you couldn’t have made me happier! When Will comes home, well —.” He waxed poetic at the thought of Will coming home to become the town’s beloved doctor. “He’ll build you a two-story home. There’ll be more babies, nice cars, maybe even a real hospital. He’ll be the man everyone wants, school boards, the bank, the cotton co-op.” Will, and Virginia, would reflect in the glow of Poppy’s golden years and Tierra would be eternally grateful. “I suggest that you give these people what they want – a war bride. When God gives you crumbs, go bake a cake. A wedding cake.”

For the next two hours Virginia sat at her desk in the courthouse, her eyes fixed on ration coupon books, OPA registries, and bulletins announcing rules changes in the number of yellow coupons that could be used to supplement red stamps for meat (not very many) or blue stamps for cottage

cheese (no limit). Her mind, however, was not focused on month-to-month whimsies of the Office of Price Administration.

From the moment Doc Pritchard had told her to get dressed Virginia had imagined the day when she would tell Poppy she was pregnant. His reaction would be to slap her (possibly), to insult her for sleeping around (probably), to ask how she thought it would make him look in the eyes of the town (certainly), and to tell Bart that Virginia, too, had brought shame on the family (as he had done when they left Emma at the State Hospital in Lubbock). She would stand defiant. If he slapped her, she would smile. To his accusation, she would tell the truth: she had not slept around. *He's the only one, and I planned it as much as he did. Maybe more.* As for how it would make Poppy look, Virginia carefully scripted the scene: *For once, Poppy, it isn't about you! It is my baby and I'll have it no matter what you or anyone in town says!* As for Bart, she would snort that at least one of Poppy's children could procreate. She had no answer if Poppy were to say anything hateful about her mother; she prayed he would not.

Nothing she had planned for had come to pass. She was flabbergasted that he had announced in the *Times* that she had eloped with Will. He might have expected her to elope to defuse an embarrassing pregnancy, but he wasn't embarrassed – he was delighted! *He should hate me; instead he's turning it into another opportunity to own the town...* She thought of how often she had

seriously considered marrying Will (a few times, not many) and of how often Poppy succeeded in making her do as he wished (every time). To those thoughts she added a fair degree of anxiety, given that she was likely to lose her job at the ration desk when the county commissioners learned that she was pregnant and a war bride to boot, a woman whose husband who could send money home from the army.

And, to her credit, she was concerned for Will. What would he think when someone told him that he was married to the girl who, the last time she saw him, had not agreed to wait for him? She hadn't been prepared to marry him but she also hadn't set out to hurt him.

By five o'clock she had cooled off. She left the courthouse, marched down the wooden sidewalk past the general store and the bank, and stopped in at the drug store before circling back to Reilly's Grocery. She knew it never occurred to Poppy to ask his daughter's permission to announce her elopement to cover up her pregnancy. Even so, as anger and uncertainty wrestled for primacy, she understood why Poppy had done it. Every single person in Tierra depended on him one way or another. He was looked to and listened to, his help sought by all. Now his daughter was pregnant and her soldier was five thousand miles away. Poppy could not lose face before the town. It was then that Virginia saw Shirley Fleming walk out the front door of Reilly's Grocery.

"Hello, Shirley."

Virginia saw Shirley's eyes bulge and her face tighten. *She knows.* It was the first joy Virginia experienced as a married woman. She actually smiled.

"Hello, Virginia." Shirley quickly put up her own guard, tilting her head to the right and peering at Virginia from the left sides of her eyes, arching her brows in rebuke as if Virginia was one of her third grade pupils. She crossed her arms and made no secret of examining Virginia from head to toe for evidence of a shotgun to explain the surprise wedding announcement. "Congratulations," she resumed, "Will must be very... happy."

"He certainly is," Virginia answered. "He always wanted to get married. Of course, you know that. When was the first time he proposed to me? Let me think."

They both knew the first time. It had been at their high school graduation dance, one week after Will had told Virginia that he had a scholarship. Will had broken up with Shirley at the football Homecoming Dance and Shirley had accused him, correctly, of wanting to 'go out' with Virginia. Virginia indeed had wanted to go out with Will; he was rather nice to look at and reasonably intelligent and, as much as anything else, Shirley had him. For the rest of their senior year merely going out with Will had been pleasant enough. He had bought her a record for Christmas, some chocolate on Valentine's Day, and a corsage at Easter. When Spring rains had filled the

quarry they went swimming with Hoyt and Johnny and Molly, although not with Shirley and definitely not with Bart. And, of course, she and Will had gone to the quarry by themselves, once, ostensibly to swim. Even now Virginia enjoyed the memory of their senior year.

Then came the graduation dance. The first shock had been that Hoyt Carter and Johnny Bradley had signed up for the army. "Got nowhere else to work, not here," they had said. "We *have* to go to the army."

The second shock had been Will's college scholarship. "Just got this letter," he had said, showing her. "And if I do well the first two years, they'll let me go to medical school." The letter did say that. At eighteen she was not sufficiently experienced to consider that such a scholarship was quite unusual, mysterious even.

"I'll have a future, Virginia, a real future. Will you ...?"

At that first of many proposals, Virginia had said no. She wasn't ready to settle down, something Will should have figured out for himself from the incident at the quarry. Rumors, never proved, also held that Shirley had proposed to Will, who likewise said no. It was no secret, however, that Virginia suggested to Shirley that she encourage Hoyt Carter, an act Virginia regretted because of the scorn it brought to Hoyt from the cheerleader who said he wasn't good enough.

And thus ensued the first of many parting scenes at the Greyhound bus

stop in front of Nona's Café. Hoyt tried to say goodbye to Shirley, who ignored him. Molly said goodbye to Johnny, then burst into tears. Bart, at a distance, said good riddance to all of them, to Molly who deserved it for picking Johnny over Bart and to Shirley who had chosen Will over Bart. He had gotten even with Johnny, and Hoyt in the bargain, but in his mind he still had a score to settle with Will. As oblivious to Bart as to Hoyt, Shirley spied. Will asked Virginia to 'wait for him,' which Virginia thought was sweet but, knowing instinctively what happened to girls who waited for boys away at college, she didn't exactly promise she would. The bus pulled away. The Flemings drove Shirley off to college at Texas Tech. Virginia assumed that she had probably seen the last of all of them.

Virginia would have written Will a letter to finish it herself except that, at Christmas, Shirley had come home from school and made the mistake of letting it be known that she had been writing from her dormitory room in Lubbock to Will at his in El Paso. That was enough to make Virginia decide to re-kindle Will's flame. At the end of Christmas he stood on the bus steps and asked her again. Everyone in town knew it.

When he came home for summer, that year and every summer and holiday afterward, Shirley beat Virginia to the bus stop. Hers was the first face Will saw. In September, then and every year after, when it was time for Will to go back to school or to summer internships or Will's first military training after

medical school, Shirley showed up at the bus stop and stood by as Will again asked Virginia to wait for him. At first Virginia would have broken it off if Shirley hadn't been so stupid as to keep showing up, and showing interest, at times when Virginia had the expectation of enough privacy to tell Will it was over. However, as they went along, Virginia was less sure. The nice looking boy gradually became a thoughtful and caring, albeit quiet, young man. Will's boyish good looks matured into a kind face and gentle demeanor. If anything, he was even more tolerable to look at and very well educated, at least compared to anyone else Virginia knew. More than once, she almost agreed to wait for him. This went on among the three of them for seven years.

About the Author

Texas native, author, attorney and lecturer Jack Woodville London graduated from West Texas State University and the University of Texas Law School. A historian as well as a trial attorney, London was an officer in the Quartermaster Corps of the United States Army and has traveled extensively. Having written articles for numerous professional journals, he now has turned his pen to historical fiction. *Virginia's War: Tierra, Texas 1944* is the first book in his World War II trilogy ***French Letters***.

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