Counter-Attack and Other Poems

by Siegfried Sassoon

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COUNTER-ATTACK AND OTHER POEMS

BY SIEGFRIED SASSOON

With An Introduction By Robert Nichols

TO ROBERT ROSS

Dans la trêve desolée de cette matinée, ces hommes qui avaient été tenaillés par la fatigue, fouettés par la pluie, bouleversés par toute une nuit de tonnerre, ces rescapés des volcans et de l'inondation entrevoyaient à quel point la guerre, aussi hideuse au moral qu'au physique, non seulement viole le bon sens, avilit les grandes idées, commande tous les crimes—mais ils se rappelaient combien elle avait développé en eux et autour d'eux tous les mauvais instincts sans en excepter un seul; la méchanceté jusqu'au sadisme, l'égoisme jusqu'à la férocité, le besoin de jouir jusqu'à la folie. HENRI BARBUSSE. (Le Feu.)

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INTRODUCTION

Sassoon the Man

In appearance he is tall, big-boned, loosely built. He is clean-shaven, pale or with a flush; has a heavy jaw, wide mouth with the upper lip slightly protruding and the

curve of it very pronounced like that of a shrivelled leaf (as I have noticed is common in many poets). His nose is aquiline, the nostrils being wide and heavily arched. This characteristic and the fullness, depth and heat of his dark eyes give him the air of a sullen falcon. He speaks slowly, enunciating the words as if they pained him, in a voice that has something of the troubled thickness apparent in the voices of those who emerge from a deep grief. As he speaks, his large hands, roughened by trench toil and by riding, wander aimlessly until some emotion grips him when the knuckles harden and he clutches at his knees or at the edge of the table. And all the while he will be breathing hard like a man who has swum a distance. When he reads his poems he chants and one would think that he communed with himself save that, at the pauses, he shoots a powerful glance at the listener. Between the poems he is still but moves his lips… He likes best to speak of hunting (he will shout of it!), of open air mornings when the gorse alone flames brighter than the sky, of country quiet, of his mother,

[Footnote: His father was a well-to-do country gentleman of Anglo-Jewish stock, his mother an English woman, a Miss Thornycroft, sister of the sculptor of that name.]

of poetry—usually Shelley, Masefield and Thomas Hardy—and last and chiefly—but always with a rapid, tumbling enunciation and a much-irked desperate air filled with pain—of soldiers. For the incubus of war is on him so that his days are shot with anguish and his nights with horror.

He is twenty-eight years old; was educated at Marlborough and Christchurch, Oxford; was a master of fox-hounds and is a captain in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. Thrice he has fought in France and once in Palestine. Behind his name are set the letters M.C. since he has won the Military Cross for an act of valour which went near to securing him a higher honour.

Sassoon the Poet

The poetry of Siegfried Sassoon divides itself into two rough classes—the idyllic

and the satiric. War has defiled one to produce the other. At heart Siegfried Sassoon is an idealist.

Before the war he had hardly published a line. He spent his summers in the company of books, at the piano, on expeditions, and in playing tennis. During winter he hunted. Hunting was a greater passion with him than poetry. Much of his poetry celebrated the loveliness of the field as seen by the huntsman in the early morning light. But few probably guessed that the youth known to excel in field sports excelled also in poetry. For, in its way, this early poetry does excel. It was characteristic of him that nearly every little book he then wrote was privately printed. Poetry was for him just something for private and particular enjoyment—like a ride alone before breakfast. Among these privately printed books are Twelve Sonnets (1911), Melodies, An Ode for Music, Hyacinth (all 1912). The names are significant. He was occupied with natural beauty and with music. In 1913 he publishes in a limited and obscure edition Apollo in Doelyrium, wherein it seems that he is beginning to find a certain want of body and basis in his poems made of beautiful words about beautiful objects. Later in the same year, with Masefield's Everlasting Mercy (1911), Widow in the Bye Sheet (1912) and Daffodil Fields (1913) before him, he starts to write a parody of these uncouth intrusions of the sorrows of obscure persons into his paradise but half way through the poem adopts the Masefield manner in earnest

[Footnote: I had this from his own mouth.]

and finishes by unsuccessfully endeavouring to rival his master. In 1914 the War breaks out. Home on leave in 1915 he privately prints Discoveries, a little book which contains some of the loveliest of his 'paradise' poems. In 1916 the change has come. He can hardly believe it himself. 'Morning Glory' (privately printed) includes four war poems. He has not definitely turned to his later style but he hovers on the brink. The war is beginning to pain him. The poems 'To Victory' and 'The Dragon

and the Undying' show him turning toward his paradise to see if its beauty can save him … The year 1917 witnesses the publication of The Old Huntsman.

[Footnote: 'The Old Huntsman,' Dutton & Co., 1918.]

This book secured instantaneous success. Siegfried Sassoon, on its publication, became one of the leading young poets of England. The book begins with the long monologue of a retired huntsman, a piece of remarkable characterisation. It continues with all the best of the 'paradise' poems, including the loveliest in 'Discoveries' and 'Morning Glory.' There are also the 'bridge' poems between his old manner and his new such as the 'To Victory' mentioned above. But interspersed among the paradise poems are the first poems in his final war style. He tells the story of the change in a characteristic manner—Conscripts (page 51, 'The Old Huntsman'). For like nearly every one of the young English poets, he is to some extent a humourist. His humour is not, however, even through 'The Old Huntsman' all of such a wise and gentle tenor. He breaks out into lively bitterness in such poems as 'They,' 'The Tombstone Maker' and 'Blighters.'

CONSCRIPTS

"Fall in, that awkward squad, and strike no more "Attractive attitudes! Dress by the right! "The luminous rich colours that you wore "Have changed to hueless khaki in the night. "Magic? What's magic got to do with you? "There's no such thing! Blood's red and skies are blue."

They gasped and sweated, marching up and down. I drilled them till they cursed my raucous shout. Love chucked his lute away and dropped his crown. Rhyme got sore heels and wanted to fall out. "Left, right! Press on your butts!" They looked at me Reproachful; how I longed to set them free!

I gave them lectures on Defence, Attack; They fidgeted and shuffled, yawned and sighed, And boggled at my questions. Joy was slack, And Wisdom gnawed his fingers, gloomy-eyed. Young Fancy—how I loved him all the while— Stared at his

note-book with a rueful smile.

Their training done, I shipped them all to France. Where most of those I'd loved too well got killed. Rapture and pale Enchantment and Romance, And many a sickly, slender lord who'd filled My soul long since with litanies of sin. Went home, because they couldn't stand the din.

But the kind, common ones that I despised, (Hardly a man of them I'd count as friend), What stubborn-hearted virtues they disguised! They stood and played the hero to the end, Won gold and silver medals bright with bars, And marched resplendent home with crowns and stars.

This book (in consequence almost wholly of these bitter poems) enjoyed a remarkable success with the soldiers fighting in France. One met it everywhere. "Hello, you know Siegfried Sassoon then, do you? Well, tell him from me that the more he lays it on thick to those who don't realize the war the better. That's the stuff we want. We're fed up with the old men's death-or-glory stunt." In 1918 appeared 'Countermans' Attack': here there is hardly a trace of the 'paradise' feeling. You can't even think of paradise when you're in hell. For Sassoon was now well along the way of thorns. How many lives had he not seen spilled apparently to no purpose? Did not the fact of war arch him in like a dirty blood-red sky? He breaks out, almost like a mad man, into imprecations, into vehement tirades, into sarcasms, ironies, the hellish laughters that arise from a heart that is not broken once for all but that is newly broken every day while the Monster that devours the lives of the young continues its ravages. Take, for instance, the magnificent 'To Any Dead Officer', written just before America entered the war. Many reading this poem would think Great Britain was going to cease fighting. But nothing of the sort. One must always remember that bitter as these imprecations are against those who mismanaged certain episodes in the war, the ultimate foe is not they but the German Junkers who planned this war for forty years, who have given the lovely earth over to hideous

defilement and the youths of all nations to carnage…

Sometimes in this book Sassoon fails to express himself properly. This fact is, I think, a tribute to his sincerity. For his earlier work very clearly displays his technical proficiency. But here what can he do? Indignation chokes and strangles him. He claws often enough at unsatisfactory words, dislocates his sentences, tumbles out his images as if he would pulp the makers of war beneath them. Very rarely does he attain to the poignant simplicity of 'The Hawthorn Tree' or the detached irony of 'Does it Matter?'

Can he then see nothing else in war? I remember him once turning to me and saying suddenly apropos of certain exalté poems in my 'Ardours and Endurances': 'Yes, I see all that and I agree with you, Robert. War has made me. I think I am a man now as well as a poet. You have said the things well enough. Now let us nevermore say another word of whatever little may be good in war for the individual who has a heart to be steeled.'

I remember I nodded, for further acquaintance with war inclines me to his opinion.

'Let no one ever,' he continued, 'from henceforth say a word in any way countenancing war. It is dangerous even to speak of how here and there the individual may gain some hardship of soul by it. For war is hell and those who institute it are criminals. Were there anything to say for it, it should not be said for its spiritual disasters far outweigh any of its advantages.'

For myself this is the truth. War doesn't ennoble: it degrades. The words of Barbusse placed at the beginning of this book should be engraved over the doors of every war office of every State in the world.

While war is a possibility man is little better than a savage and civilisation the mere moments of rest between a succession of nightmares. It is to help to end this horror that Siegfried Sassoon and the many others who feel like him have continued to fight as after the publication of this book he fought in Palestine and in France.

You civilized persons who read this book not only as a poet but as a soldier I beg of you not to turn from it. Read it again and again till its words become part of your consciousness. It was written by a man for mankind's sake, that 'that which is humane' might no more be an empty phrase, that the words of Blake might blossom to a new meaning—

Thou art a man, God is no more, Thine own humanity learn to adore.

New York City, Nov. 20th-23rd. ROBERT NICHOLS.

PRELUDE: THE TROOPS

Dim, gradual thinning of the shapeless gloom Shudders to drizzling daybreak that reveals Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky Haggard and hopeless. They, who have beaten down The stale despair of night, must now renew Their desolation in the truce of dawn, Murdering the livid hours that grope for peace.

Yet these, who cling to life with stubborn hands, Can grin through storms of death and find a gap In the clawed, cruel tangles of his defence. They march from safety, and the bird-sung joy Of grass-green thickets, to the land where all Is ruin, and nothing blossoms but the sky That hastens over them where they endure Sad, smoking, flat horizons, reeking woods, And foundered trench-lines volleying doom for doom.

O my brave brown companions, when your souls Flock silently away, and the eyeless dead Shame the wild beast of battle on the ridge, Death will stand grieving in that field of war Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent. And through some mooned Valhalla there will pass Battalions and battalions, scarred from hell; The unreturning army that was youth; The legions who have suffered and are dust.

COUNTER-ATTACK

We'd gained our first objective hours before While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes, Pallid, unshaved and thirsty, blind with smoke. Things seemed all right at first. We held their line, With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed, And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench. The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps; And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud, Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled; And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair, Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime. And then the rain began,—the jolly old rain!

A yawning soldier knelt against the bank, Staring across the morning blear with fog; He wondered when the Allemands would get busy; And then, of course, they started with five-nines Traversing, sure as fate, and never a dud. Mute in the clamour of shells he watched them burst Spouting dark earth and wire with gusts from hell, While posturing giants dissolved in drifts of smoke. He crouched and flinched, dizzy with galloping fear, Sick for escape,—loathing the strangled horror And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead.

An officer came blundering down the trench: "Stand-to and man the fire-step!" On he went … Gasping and bawling, "Fire-step … counter-attack!" Then the haze lifted. Bombing on the right Down the old sap: machine-guns on the left; And stumbling figures looming out in front. "O Christ, they're coming at us!" Bullets spat, And he remembered his rifle … rapid fire …

And started blazing wildly … then a bang Crumpled and spun him sideways, knocked him out To grunt and wriggle: none heeded him; he choked And fought the flapping veils of smothering gloom, Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans … Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned, Bleeding to death. The counter-attack had failed.

THE REAR-GUARD

(Hindenburg Line, April 1917.)

Groping along the tunnel, step by step, He winked his prying torch with patching glare From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know, A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed; And he, exploring fifty feet below The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw some one lie Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug, And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug. "I'm looking for headquarters." No reply. "God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no sleep.) "Get up and guide me through this stinking place." Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap, And flashed his beam across the livid face Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore Agony dying hard ten days before; And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

Alone he staggered on until he found Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair To the dazed, muttering creatures underground Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound. At last, with sweat of horror in his hair, He climbed through darkness to the twilight air, Unloading hell behind him step by step.

WIRERS

"Pass it along, the wiring party's going out"— And yawning sentries mumble, "Wirers going out," Unravelling; twisting; hammering stakes with muffled thud, They toil with stealthy haste and anger in their blood.

The Boche sends up a flare. Black forms stand rigid there, Stock-still like posts; then darkness, and the clumsy ghosts Stride hither and thither, whispering, tripped by clutching snare Of snags and tangles. Ghastly dawn with vaporous coasts Gleams desolate along the sky, night's misery ended.

Young Hughes was badly hit; I heard him carried away, Moaning at every lurch; no

doubt he'll die to-day. But we can say the front-line wire's been safely mended.

ATTACK

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun In the wild purple of the glowering sun, Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one, Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire. The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear, Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire. Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear, They leave their trenches, going over the top, While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists, And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists, Flounders in mud. O Jesu, make it stop!

DREAMERS

Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land, Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows. In the great hour of destiny they stand, Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows. Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives. Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats, And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain, Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats, And mocked by hopeless longing to regain Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats, And going to the office in the train.

HOW TO DIE

Dark clouds are smouldering into red While down the craters morning burns. The dying soldier shifts his head To watch the glory that returns: He lifts his fingers

toward the skies Where holy brightness breaks in flame; Radiance reflected in his eyes, And on his lips a whispered name.

You'd think, to hear some people talk, That lads go West with sobs and curses, And sullen faces white as chalk, Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hearses. But they've been taught the way to do it Like Christian soldiers; not with haste And shuddering groans; but passing through it With due regard for decent taste.

THE EFFECT

"The effect of our bombardment was terrific. One man told me he had never seen so many dead before."—War Correspondent.

"He'd never seen so many dead before." They sprawled in yellow daylight while he swore And gasped and lugged his everlasting load Of bombs along what once had been a road. "How peaceful are the dead." Who put that silly gag in some one's head?

"He'd never seen so many dead before." The lilting words danced up and down his brain, While corpses jumped and capered in the rain. No, no; he wouldn't count them any more … The dead have done with pain: They've choked; they can't come back to life again.

When Dick was killed last week he looked like that, Flapping along the fire-step like a fish, After the blazing crump had knocked him flat … "How many dead? As many as ever you wish. Don't count 'em; they're too many. Who'll buy my nice fresh corpses, two a penny?"

TWELVE MONTHS AFTER

Hullo! here's my platoon, the lot I had last year. "The war'll be over soon." "What 'opes?" "No bloody fear!" Then, "Number Seven, 'shun! All present and correct."

They're standing in the sun, impassive and erect. Young Gibson with his grin; and Morgan, tired and white; Jordan, who's out to win a D.C.M. some night; And Hughes that's keen on wiring; and Davies ('79), Who always must be firing at the Boche front line. * * * * * "Old soldiers never die; they simply fide a-why!" That's what they used to sing along the roads last spring; That's what they used to say before the push began; That's where they are to-day, knocked over to a man.

THE FATHERS

Snug at the club two fathers sat, Gross, goggle-eyed, and full of chat. One of them said: "My eldest lad Writes cheery letters from Bagdad. But Arthur's getting all the fun At Arras with his nine-inch gun."

"Yes," wheezed the other, "that's the luck! My boy's quite broken-hearted, stuck In England training all this year. Still, if there's truth in what we hear, The Huns intend to ask for more Before they bolt across the Rhine." I watched them toddle through the door— These impotent old friends of mine.

BASE DETAILS

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath, I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base, And speed glum heroes up the line to death. You'd see me with my puffy petulant face, Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel, Reading the Roll of Honour. "Poor young chap," I'd say—"I used to know his father well; Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap." And when the war is done and youth stone dead, I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed.

THE GENERAL

"Good-morning; good-morning!" the General said When we met him last week on

our way to the line. Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead, And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine. "He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack. * * * * * But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

LAMENTATIONS

I found him in the guard-room at the Base. From the blind darkness I had heard his crying And blundered in. With puzzled, patient face A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest. And, all because his brother had gone West, Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was kneeling Half-naked on the floor. In my belief Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

DOES IT MATTER?

Does it matter?—losing your leg? … For people will always be kind, And you need not show that you mind When the others come in after hunting To gobble their muffins and eggs.

Does it matter?—losing your sight? … There's such splendid work for the blind; And people will always be kind, As you sit on the terrace remembering And turning your face to the light.

Do they matter?—those dreams from the pit? … You can drink and forget and be glad, And people won't say that you're mad; For they'll know that you've fought for your country, And no one will worry a bit.

FIGHT TO A FINISH

The boys came back. Bands played and flags were flying, And Yellow-Pressmen

thronged the sunlit street To cheer the soldiers who'd refrained from dying, And hear the music of returning feet. "Of all the thrills and ardours War has brought, This moment is the finest." (So they thought.)

Snapping their bayonets on to charge the mob, Grim Fusiliers broke ranks with glint of steel. At last the boys had found a cushy job. * * * * * I heard the Yellow-Pressmen grunt and squeal; And with my trusty bombers turned and went To clear those Junkers out of Parliament.

EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS

He seemed so certain "all was going well," As he discussed the glorious time he'd had While visiting the trenches. "One can tell You've gathered big impressions!" grinned the lad Who'd been severely wounded in the back In some wiped-out impossible Attack. "Impressions? Yes, most vivid! I am writing A little book called Europe on the Rack, Based on notes made while witnessing the fighting. I hope I've caught the feeling of 'the Line' And the amazing spirit of the troops. By Jove, those flying-chaps of ours are fine! I watched one daring beggar looping loops, Soaring and diving like some bird of prey. And through it all I felt that splendour shine Which makes us win." The soldier sipped his wine. "Ah, yes, but it's the Press that leads the way!"

SUICIDE IN THE TRENCHES

I knew a simple soldier boy Who grinned at life in empty joy, Slept soundly through the lonesome dark, And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum, With crumps and lice and lack of rum, He put a bullet through his brain. No one spoke of him again. * * * * * You snug-faced crowds with kindling eye Who cheer when soldier lads march by, Sneak home and pray you'll never know The hell where youth and laughter go.

GLORY OF WOMEN

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave, Or wounded in a mentionable place. You worship decorations; you believe That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace. You make us shells. You listen with delight, By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled. You crown our distant ardours while we fight, And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed. You can't believe that British troops "retire" When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run, Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood. O German mother dreaming by the fire, While you are knitting socks to send your son His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

THEIR FRAILTY

He's got a Blighty wound. He's safe; and then War's fine and bold and bright. She can forget the doomed and prisoned men Who agonize and fight.

He's back in France. She loathes the listless strain And peril of his plight. Beseeching Heaven to send him home again, She prays for peace each night.

Husbands and sons and lovers; everywhere They die; War bleeds us white. Mothers and wives and sweethearts,—they don't care So long as He's all right.

THE HAWTHORN TREE

Not much to me is yonder lane Where I go every day; But when there's been a shower of rain And hedge-birds whistle gay, I know my lad that's out in France With fearsome things to see Would give his eyes for just one glance At our white hawthorn tree. * * * * * Not much to me is yonder lane Where he so longs to tread; But when there's been a shower of rain I think I'll never weep again Until I've heard he's dead.

THE INVESTITURE

God with a Roll of Honour in His hand Sits welcoming the heroes who have died, While sorrowless angels ranked on either side Stand easy in Elysium's meadow-land. Then you come shyly through the garden gate, Wearing a blood-soaked bandage on your head; And God says something kind because you're dead, And homesick, discontented with your fate.

If I were there we'd snowball Death with skulls; Or ride away to hunt in Devil's Wood With ghosts of puppies that we walked of old. But you're alone; and solitude annuls Our earthly jokes; and strangely wise and good You roam forlorn along the streets of gold.

TRENCH DUTY

Shaken from sleep, and numbed and scarce awake, Out in the trench with three hours' watch to take, I blunder through the splashing mirk; and then Hear the gruff muttering voices of the men Crouching in cabins candle-chinked with light. Hark! There's the big bombardment on our right Rumbling and bumping; and the dark's a glare Of flickering horror in the sectors where We raid the Boche; men waiting, stiff and chilled, Or crawling on their bellies through the wire. "What? Stretcher-bearers wanted? Some one killed?" Five minutes ago I heard a sniper fire: Why did he do it? … Starlight overhead— Blank stars. I'm wide-awake; and some chap's dead.

BREAK OF DAY

There seemed a smell of autumn in the air At the bleak end of night; he shivered there In a dank, musty dug-out where he lay, Legs wrapped in sand-bags,—lumps of chalk and clay Spattering his face. Dry-mouthed, he thought, "To-day We start the damned attack; and, Lord knows why, Zero's at nine; how bloody if I'm done in

Under the freedom of that morning sky!" And then he coughed and dozed, cursing the din.

Was it the ghost of autumn in that smell Of underground, or God's blank heart grown kind, That sent a happy dream to him in hell?— Where men are crushed like clods, and crawl to find Some crater for their wretchedness; who lie In outcast immolation, doomed to die Far from clean things or any hope of cheer, Cowed anger in their eyes, till darkness brims And roars into their heads, and they can hear Old childish talk, and tags of foolish hymns.

He sniffs the chilly air; (his dreaming starts). He's riding in a dusty Sussex lane In quiet September; slowly night departs; And he's a living soul, absolved from pain. Beyond the brambled fences where he goes Are glimmering fields with harvest piled in sheaves, And tree-tops dark against the stars grown pale; Then, clear and shrill, a distant farm-cock crows; And there's a wall of mist along the vale Where willows shake their watery-sounding leaves. He gazes on it all, and scarce believes That earth is telling its old peaceful tale; He thanks the blessed world that he was born … Then, far away, a lonely note of the horn.

They're drawing the Big Wood! Unlatch the gate, And set Golumpus going on the grass: He knows the corner where it's best to wait And hear the crashing woodland chorus pass; The corner where old foxes make their track To the Long Spinney; that's the place to be. The bracken shakes below an ivied tree, And then a cub looks out; and "Tally-o-back!" He bawls, and swings his thong with volleying crack,— All the clean thrill of autumn in his blood, And hunting surging through him like a flood In joyous welcome from the untroubled past; While the war drifts away, forgotten at last.

Now a red, sleepy sun above the rim Of twilight stares along the quiet weald, And the kind, simple country shines revealed In solitudes of peace, no longer dim. The old horse lifts his face and thanks the light, Then stretches down his head to crop the

green. All things that he has loved are in his sight; The places where his happiness has been Are in his eyes, his heart, and they are good. * * * * * Hark! there's the horn: they're drawing the Big Wood.

TO ANY DEAD OFFICER

Well, how are things in Heaven? I wish you'd say, Because I'd like to know that you're all right. Tell me, have you found everlasting day, Or been sucked in by everlasting night? For when I shut my eyes your face shows pain; I hear you make some cheery old remark— I can rebuild you in my brain, Though you've gone out patrolling in the dark.

You hated tours of trenches; you were proud Of nothing more than having good years to spend; Longed to get home and join the careless crowd Of chaps who work in peace with Time for friend. That's all washed out now. You're beyond the wire: No earthly chance can send you crawling back; You've finished with machine-gun fire— Knocked over in a hopeless dud-attack.

Somehow I always thought you'd get done in, Because you were so desperate keen to live: You were all out to try and save your skin, Well knowing how much the world had got to give. You joked at shells and talked the usual "shop," Stuck to your dirty job and did it fine: With "Jesus Christ! when will it stop? Three years… It's hell unless we break their line."

So when they told me you'd been left for dead I wouldn't believe them, feeling it must be true. Next week the bloody Roll of Honour said "Wounded and missing"—(That's the thing to do When lads are left in shell-holes dying slow, With nothing but blank sky and wounds that ache, Moaning for water till they know It's night, and then it's not worth while to wake!)

* * * * *

Good-bye, old lad! Remember me to God, And tell Him that our Politicians swear

They won't give in till Prussian Rule's been trod Under the Heel of England… Are you there? … Yes … and the War won't end for at least two years; But we've got stacks of men… I'm blind with tears, Staring into the dark. Cheero! I wish they'd killed you in a decent show.

SICK LEAVE

When I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm,— They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead. While the dim charging breakers of the storm Bellow and drone and rumble overhead, Out of the gloom they gather about my bed. They whisper to my heart; their thoughts are mine. "Why are you here with all your watches ended? From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the Line." In bitter safety I awake, unfriended; And while the dawn begins with slashing rain I think of the Battalion in the mud. "When are you going out to them again? Are they not still your brothers through our blood?"

BANISHMENT

I am banished from the patient men who fight. They smote my heart to pity, built my pride. Shoulder to aching shoulder, side by side, They trudged away from life's broad wealds of light. Their wrongs were mine; and ever in my sight They went arrayed in honour. But they died,— Not one by one: and mutinous I cried To those who sent them out into the night.

The darkness tells how vainly I have striven To free them from the pit where they must dwell In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven By grappling guns. Love drove me to rebel. Love drives me back to grope with them through hell; And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven.

SONG-BOOKS OF THE WAR

In fifty years, when peace outshines Remembrance of the battle lines, Adventurous lads will sigh and cast Proud looks upon the plundered past. On summer morn or winter's night, Their hearts will kindle for the fight, Reading a snatch of soldier-song, Savage and jaunty, fierce and strong; And through the angry marching rhymes Of blind regret and haggard mirth, They'll envy us the dazzling times When sacrifice absolved our earth.

Some ancient man with silver locks Will lift his weary face to say: "War was a fiend who stopped our clocks Although we met him grim and gay." And then he'll speak of Haig's last drive, Marvelling that any came alive Out of the shambles that men built And smashed, to cleanse the world of guilt. But the boys, with grin and sidelong glance, Will think, "Poor grandad's day is done." And dream of those who fought in France And lived in time to share the fun.

THRUSHES

Tossed on the glittering air they soar and skim, Whose voices make the emptiness of light A windy palace. Quavering from the brim Of dawn, and bold with song at edge of night, They clutch their leafy pinnacles and sing Scornful of man, and from his toils aloof Whose heart's a haunted woodland whispering; Whose thoughts return on tempest-baffled wing; Who hears the cry of God in everything, And storms the gate of nothingness for proof.

AUTUMN

October's bellowing anger breaks and cleaves The bronzed battalions of the stricken wood In whose lament I hear a voice that grieves For battle's fruitless harvest, and the feud Of outraged men. Their lives are like the leaves Scattered in flocks of ruin, tossed and blown Along the westering furnace flaring red. O martyred youth and manhood overthrown, The burden of your wrongs is on my head.

INVOCATION

Come down from heaven to meet me when my breath Chokes, and through drumming shafts of stifling death I stumble toward escape, to find the door Opening on morn where I may breathe once more Clear cock-crow airs across some valley dim With whispering trees. While dawn along the rim Of night's horizon flows in lakes of fire, Come down from heaven's bright hill, my song's desire.

Belov'd and faithful, teach my soul to wake In glades deep-ranked with flowers that gleam and shake And flock your paths with wonder. In your gaze Show me the vanquished vigil of my days. Mute in that golden silence hung with green, Come down from heaven and bring me in your eyes Remembrance of all beauty that has been, And stillness from the pools of Paradise.

REPRESSION OF WAR EXPERIENCE

Now light the candles; one; two; there's a moth; What silly beggars they are to blunder in And scorch their wings with glory, liquid flame— No, no, not that,—it's bad to think of war, When thoughts you've gagged all day come back to scare you; And it's been proved that soldiers don't go mad Unless they lose control of ugly thoughts That drive them out to jabber among the trees.

Now light your pipe; look, what a steady hand, Draw a deep breath; stop thinking, count fifteen, And you're as right as rain… Why won't it rain? … I wish there'd be a thunder-storm to-night, With bucketsful of water to sluice the dark, And make the roses hang their dripping heads.

Books; what a jolly company they are, Standing so quiet and patient on their shelves, Dressed in dim brown, and black, and white, and green, And every kind of colour. Which will you read? Come on; O do read something; they're so wise. I tell you all the wisdom of the world Is waiting for you on those shelves; and yet You sit

and gnaw your nails, and let your pipe out, And listen to the silence: on the ceiling There's one big, dizzy moth that bumps and flutters; And in the breathless air outside the house The garden waits for something that delays. There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees,— Not people killed in battle,—they're in France,— But horrible shapes in shrouds—old men who died Slow, natural deaths,—old men with ugly souls, Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins. * * * * * You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home; You'd never think there was a bloody war on! … O yes, you would … why, you can hear the guns. Hark! Thud, thud, thud,—quite soft … they never cease— Those whispering guns—O Christ, I want to go out And screech at them to stop—I'm going crazy; I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

THE TRIUMPH

When life was a cobweb of stars for Beauty who came In the whisper of leaves or a bird's lone cry in the glen, On dawn-lit hills and horizons girdled with flame I sought for the triumph that troubles the faces of men.

With death in the terrible flickering gloom of the fight I was cruel and fierce with despair; I was naked and bound; was stricken: and Beauty returned through the shambles of night; In the faces of men she returned; and their triumph I found.

SURVIVORS

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk. Of course they're "longing to go out again,"— These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk, They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,— Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride … Men who went out to battle, grim and glad; Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and

mad.

CRAIGLOCKART, Oct. 1917.

JOY-BELLS

Ring your sweet bells; but let them be farewells To the green-vista'd gladness of the past That changed us into soldiers; swing your bells To a joyful chime; but let it be the last.

What means this metal in windy belfries hung When guns are all our need? Dissolve these bells Whose tones are tuned for peace: with martial tongue Let them cry doom and storm the sun with shells.

Bells are like fierce-browed prelates who proclaim That "if our Lord returned He'd fight for us." So let our bells and bishops do the same, Shoulder to shoulder with the motor bus.

REMORSE

Lost in the swamp and welter of the pit, He flounders off the duck-boards; only he knows Each flash, and spouting crash,—each instant lit When gloom reveals the streaming rain. He goes Heavily, blindly on. And, while he blunders, "Could anything be worse than this!"—he wonders, Remembering how he saw those Germans run, Screaming for mercy among the stumps of trees: Green-faced, they dodged and darted: there was one Livid with terror, clutching at his knees… Our chaps were sticking 'em like pigs… "O hell!" He thought—"there's things in war one dare not tell Poor father sitting safe at home, who reads Of dying heroes and their deathless deeds."

DEAD MUSICIANS

I

From you, Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, The substance of my dreams took fire. You built cathedrals in my heart, And lit my pinnacled desire. You were the ardour and the bright Procession of my thoughts toward prayer. You were the wrath of storm, the light On distant citadels aflare.

II

Great names, I cannot find you now In these loud years of youth that strives Through doom toward peace: upon my brow I wear a wreath of banished lives. You have no part with lads who fought And laughed and suffered at my side. Your fugues and symphonies have brought No memory of my friends who died.

III

For when my brain is on their track, In slangy speech I call them back. With fox-trot tunes their ghosts I charm. "Another little drink won't do us any harm." I think of rag-time; a bit of rag-time; And see their faces crowding round To the sound of the syncopated beat. They've got such jolly things to tell, Home from hell with a Blighty wound so neat… * * * * * And so the song breaks off; and I'm alone. They're dead… For God's sake stop that gramophone.

THE DREAM

I

Moonlight and dew-drenched blossom, and the scent Of summer gardens; these can bring you all Those dreams that in the starlit silence fall: Sweet songs are full of odours. While I went Last night in drizzling dusk along a lane, I passed a squalid farm; from byre and midden Came the rank smell that brought me once again A dream of war that in the past was hidden.

II

Up a disconsolate straggling village street I saw the tired troops trudge: I heard their feet. The cheery Q.M.S. was there to meet And guide our Company in … I watched them stumble Into some crazy hovel, too beat to grumble; Saw them file inward, slipping from their backs Rifles, equipment, packs. On filthy straw they sit in the gloom, each face Bowed to patched, sodden boots they must unlace, While the wind chills their sweat through chinks and cracks.

III

I'm looking at their blistered feet; young Jones Stares up at me, mud-splashed and white and jaded; Out of his eyes the morning light has faded. Old soldiers with three winters in their bones Puff their damp Woodbines, whistle, stretch their toes: They can still grin at me, for each of 'em knows That I'm as tired as they are … Can they guess The secret burden that is always mine?— Pride in their courage; pity for their distress; And burning bitterness That I must take them to the accursèd Line.

IV

I cannot hear their voices, but I see Dim candles in the barn: they gulp their tea, And soon they'll sleep like logs. Ten miles away The battle winks and thuds in blundering strife. And I must lead them nearer, day by day, To the foul beast of war that bludgeons life.

IN BARRACKS

The barrack-square, washed clean with rain, Shines wet and wintry-grey and cold. Young Fusiliers, strong-legged and bold, March and wheel and march again. The sun looks over the barrack gate, Warm and white with glaring shine, To watch the soldiers of the Line That life has hired to fight with fate.

Fall out: the long parades are done. Up comes the dark; down goes the sun. The square is walled with windowed light. Sleep well, you lusty Fusiliers; Shut your brave eyes on sense and sight, And banish from your dreamless ears The bugle's

lying notes that say, "Another night; another day."

TOGETHER

Splashing along the boggy woods all day, And over brambled hedge and holding clay, I shall not think of him: But when the watery fields grow brown and dim, And hounds have lost their fox, and horses tire, I know that he'll be with me on my way Home through the darkness to the evening fire.

He's jumped each stile along the glistening lanes; His hand will be upon the mud-soaked reins; Hearing the saddle creak, He'll wonder if the frost will come next week. I shall forget him in the morning light; And while we gallop on he will not speak: But at the stable-door he'll say good-night.

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