

THE
WAR POETRY
OF
SIEGFRIED SASSOON

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Dozenal numeration is a system of thinking of numbers in twelves, rather than tens. Twelve is much more versatile, having four even divisors—2, 3, 4, and 6—as opposed to only two for ten. This means that such hatefulness as “0.333 . . .” for $\frac{1}{3}$ and “0.1666 . . .” for $\frac{1}{6}$ are things of the past, replaced by easy “0;4” (four twelfths) and “0;2” (two twelfths).

In dozenal, counting goes “one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, elv, dozen; dozen one, dozen two, dozen three, dozen four, dozen five, dozen six, dozen seven, dozen eight, dozen nine, dozen ten, dozen elv, two dozen, two dozen one . . .” It’s written as such: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, ɿ, ɸ, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 1ɿ, 1ɸ, 20, 21 . . .

Dozenal counting is at once much more efficient and much easier than decimal counting, and takes only a little bit of time to get used to. Further information can be had from the dozenal societies (for example, <http://www.dozenal.org>), as well as in many other places on the Internet.

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Goretti Publications

<http://gorpub.freeshell.org>

gorpub@gmail.com

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Dans la trêve désolée 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'égoïsme jusqu'à la férocité, le besoin de jouir jusqu'à la folie.

—HENRI BARBUSSE (*Le Feu.*)

PRELUDE: THE TROOPS

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

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

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

DREAMERS

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

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

THE REDEEMER

1 Darkness: the rain sluiced down; the mire was deep;
2 It was past twelve on a mid-winter night,
3 When peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep:
4 There, with much work to do before the light,
5 We lugged our clay-sucked boots as best we might
6 Along the trench; sometimes a bullet sang,
7 And droning shells burst with a hollow bang;
8 We were soaked, chilled and wretched, every one.
9 Darkness: the distant wink of a huge gun.

7 I turned in the black ditch, loathing the storm;
8 A rocket fizzed and burned with blanching flare,
9 And lit the face of what had been a form
10 Floundering in mirk. He stood before me there;
11 I say that he was Christ; stiff in the glare,
12 And leaning forward from his burdening task,
13 Both arms supporting it; his eyes on mine
14 Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask
15 Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shine.
16

17 No thorny crown, only a woollen cap
18 He wore—an English soldier, white and strong,
19 Who loved his time like any simple chap,
20 Good days of work and sport and homely song;
21 Now he has learned that nights are very long,
22 And dawn a watching of the windowed sky.
23 But to the end, unjudging, he'll endure
24 Horror and pain, not discontent to die
25 That Lancaster on Lune may stand secure.
26

27 He faced me, reeling in his weariness,
28 Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear.
29 I say that he was Christ, who wrought to bless
30 All groping things with freedom bright as air,
31 And with His mercy washed and made them fair.
32 Then the flame sank, and all grew black as pitch,
33 While we began to struggle along the ditch;
34 And some one flung his burden in the muck,
35 Mumbling: "O Christ Almighty, now I'm stuck!"
36

TRENCH DUTY

1 Shaken from sleep, and numbed and scarce awake,
2 Out in the trench with three hours' watch to take,
3 I blunder through the splashing mirk; and then
4 Hear the gruff muttering voices of the men
5 Crouching in cabins candle-chinked with light.
6 Hark! There's the big bombardment on our right
7 Rumbling and bumping; and the dark's a glare
8 Of flickering horror in the sectors where
9 We raid the Boche; men waiting, stiff and chilled,
10 Or crawling on their bellies through the wire.
11 "What? Stretcher-bearers wanted? Some one killed?"
12 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.

WIRERS

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

5 The Boche sends up a flare. Black forms stand rigid there,
6 Stock-still like posts; then darkness, and the clumsy ghosts
7 Stride hither and thither, whispering, tripped by clutching snare
8 Of snags and tangles.

9 Ghastly dawn with vaporous coasts
Gleams desolate along the sky, night's misery ended.

7 Young Hughes was badly hit; I heard him carried away,
8 Moaning at every lurch; no doubt he'll die to-day.
10 But *we* can say the front-line wire's been safely mended.

BREAK OF DAY

1 There seemed a smell of autumn in the air
2 At the bleak end of night; he shivered there
3 In a dank, musty dug-out where he lay,
4 Legs wrapped in sand-bags,—lumps of chalk and clay
5 Spattering his face. Dry-mouthed, he thought, "To-day
6 We start the damned attack; and, Lord knows why,
7 Zero's at nine; how bloody if I'm done in
8 Under the freedom of that morning sky!"
9 And then he coughed and dozed, cursing the din.

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

18 He sniffs the chilly air; (his dreaming starts).
19 He's riding in a dusty Sussex lane
17 In quiet September; slowly night departs;

18 And he's a living soul, absolved from pain.
20 Beyond the brambled fences where he goes
21 Are glimmering fields with harvest piled in sheaves,
22 And tree-tops dark against the stars grown pale;
23 Then, clear and shrill, a distant farm-cock crows;
24 And there's a wall of mist along the vale
25 Where willows shake their watery-sounding leaves.
26 He gazes on it all, and scarce believes
27 That earth is telling its old peaceful tale;
28 He thanks the blessed world that he was born
29 Then, far away, a lonely note of the horn.

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

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

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

A WORKING PARTY

1 Three hours ago he blundered up the trench,
2 Sliding and poising, groping with his boots;
3 Sometimes he tripped and lurched against the walls
4 With hands that pawed the sodden bags of chalk.
5 He couldn't see the man who walked in front;
6 Only he heard the drum and rattle of feet
7 Stepping along the trench-boards,—often splashing
8 Wretchedly where the sludge was ankle-deep.

9 Voices would grunt, “Keep to your right,—make way!”
10 When squeezing past the men from the front-line:
11 White faces peered, puffing a point of red;
12 Candles and braziers glinted through the chinks
13 And curtain-flaps of dug-outs; then the gloom
14 Swallowed his sense of sight; he stooped and swore
15 Because a sagging wire had caught his neck.
16 A flare went up; the shining whiteness spread
17 And flickered upward, showing nimble rats,
18 And mounds of glimmering sand-bags, bleached with rain;
19 Then the slow, silver moment died in dark.

20 The wind came posting by with chilly gusts

19 And buffeting at corners, piping thin
16 And dreary through the crannies; rifle-shots
18 Would split and crack and sing along the night,
20 And shells came calmly through the drizzling air
21 To burst with hollow bang below the hill.

22 Three hours ago he stumbled up the trench;
23 Now he will never walk that road again:
24 He must be carried back, a jolting lump
25 Beyond all need of tenderness and care;
26 A nine-stone corpse with nothing more to do.

27 He was a young man with a meagre wife
28 And two pale children in a Midland town;
29 He showed the photograph to all his mates;
27 And they considered him a decent chap
28 Who did his work and hadn't much to say,
30 And always laughed at other people's jokes
31 Because he hadn't any of his own.

32 That night, when he was busy at his job
33 Of piling bags along the parapet,
34 He thought how slow time went, stamping his feet,
35 And blowing on his fingers, pinched with cold.

36 He thought of getting back by half-past twelve,
37 And tot of rum to send him warm to sleep
38 In draughty dug-out frowsty with the fumes
39 Of coke, and full of snoring, weary men.

37 He pushed another bag along the top,
38 Craning his body outward; then a flare

40 Gave one white glimpse of No Man's Land and wire;
41 And as he dropped his head the instant split
42 His startled life with lead, and all went out.

STAND-TO: GOOD FRIDAY MORNING

1 I'd been on duty from two till four.
2 I went and stared at the dug-out door.
3 Down in the frowst I heard them snore.
4 "Stand-to!" Somebody grunted and swore.
5 Dawn was misty; the skies were still;
6 Larks were singing, discordant, shrill;
7 *They* seemed happy; but *I* felt ill.
8 Deep in water I splashed my way
9 Up the trench to our bogged front line.
10 Rain had fallen the whole damned night.
11 O Jesus, send me a wound to-day,
12 And I'll believe in Your bread and wine,
13 And get my bloody old sins washed white!

"IN THE PINK"

1 So Davies wrote: "This leaves me in the pink."
2 Then scrawled his name: "Your loving sweetheart, Willie."
3 With crosses for a hug. He'd had a drink
4 Of rum and tea; and, though the barn was chilly,
5 For once his blood ran warm; he had pay to spend.
6 Winter was passing; soon the year would mend.

7 He couldn't sleep that night. Stiff in the dark
8 He groaned and thought of Sundays at the farm,
9 When he'd go out as cheerful as a lark
10 In his best suit to wander arm-in-arm
11 With brown-eyed Gwen, and whisper in her ear
12 The simple, silly things she liked to hear.

11 And then he thought: to-morrow night we trudge
12 Up to the trenches, and my boots are rotten.
13 Five miles of stodgy clay and freezing sludge,
14 And everything but wretchedness forgotten.
15 To-night he's in the pink; but soon he'll die.
16 And still the war goes on; *he* don't know why.

THE HERO

1 "Jack fell as he'd have wished," the Mother said,
2 And folded up the letter that she'd read.
3 "The Colonel writes so nicely." Something broke
4 In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
5 She half looked up. "We mothers are so proud
6 Of our dead soldiers." Then her face was bowed.

7 Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
8 He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
9 That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
10 For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
11 Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
12 Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

11 He thought how "Jack," cold-footed, useless swine,
12 Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
13 Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
14 To get sent home; and how, at last, he died,
15 Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
16 Except that lonely woman with white hair.

BEFORE THE BATTLE

1 Music of whispering trees
2 Hushed by the broad-winged breeze
3 Where shaken water gleams;
4 And evening radiance falling
5 With reedy bird-notes calling.
6 O bear me safe through dark, you low-voiced streams.

7 I have no need to pray
8 That fear may pass away;
9 I scorn the growl and rumble of the fight
10 That summons me from cool
11 Silence of marsh and pool,
12 And yellow lilies islanded in light.
13 O river of stars and shadows, lead me through the night.

June 25th, 1916.

THE ROAD

1 The road is thronged with women; soldiers pass

2 And halt, but never see them; yet they're here—
3 A patient crowd along the sodden grass,
4 Silent, worn out with waiting, sick with fear.
5 The road goes crawling up a long hillside,
6 All ruts and stones and sludge, and the emptied dregs
7 Of battle thrown in heaps. Here where they died
8 Are stretched big-bellied horses with stiff legs;
9 And dead men, bloody-fingered from the fight,
2 Stare up at caverned darkness winking white.

8 You in the bomb-scorched kilt, poor sprawling Jock,
10 You tottered here and fell, and stumbled on,
11 Half dazed for want of sleep. No dream could mock
12 Your reeling brain with comforts lost and gone.
13 You did not feel her arms about your knees,
14 Her blind caress, her lips upon your head:
15 Too tired for thoughts of home and love and ease,
16 The road would serve you well enough for bed.

TWO HUNDRED YEARS AFTER

1 Trudging by Corbie Ridge one winter's night,
2 (Unless old, hearsay memories tricked his sight),
3 Along the pallid edge of the quiet sky
4 He watched a nosing lorry grinding on,
5 And straggling files of men; when these were gone,
6 A double limber and six mules went by,
7 Hauling the rations up through ruts and mud
8 To trench-lines digged two hundred years ago.
9 Then darkness hid them with a rainy scud,

7 And soon he saw the village lights below.

8 But when he'd told his tale, an old man said
10 That *he'd* seen soldiers pass along that hill;
11 "Poor, silent things, they were the English dead
12 Who came to fight in France and got their fill."

THE DREAM

I

1 Moonlight and dew-drenched blossom, and the scent
2 Of summer gardens; these can bring you all
3 Those dreams that in the starlit silence fall:
4 Sweet songs are full of odours.

While I went

5 Last night in drizzling dusk along a lane,
6 I passed a squalid farm; from byre and midden
7 Came the rank smell that brought me once again
8 A dream of war that in the past was hidden.

II

9 Up a disconsolate straggling village street
7 I saw the tired troops trudge: I heard their feet.
8 The cheery Q.M.S. was there to meet
10 And guide our Company in

I watched them stumble.

11 Into some crazy hovel, too beat to grumble;
12 Saw them file inward, slipping from their backs

13 Rifles, equipment, packs.

14 On filthy straw they sit in the gloom, each face
15 Bowed to patched, sodden boots they must unlace,
16 While the wind chills their sweat through chinks and cracks.

III

17 I'm looking at their blistered feet; young Jones
18 Stares up at me, mud-splashed and white and jaded;
19 Out of his eyes the morning light has faded.
16 Old soldiers with three winters in their bones
18 Puff their damp Woodbines, whistle, stretch their toes
20 *They* can still grin at me, for each of 'em knows
21 That I'm as tired as they are

Can they guess

22 The secret burden that is always mine?—
23 Pride in their courage; pity for their distress;
24 And burning bitterness
25 That I must take them to the accursèd Line.

IV

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

AT CARNOY

1 Down in the hollow there's the whole Brigade
2 Camped in four groups: through twilight falling slow
3 I hear a sound of mouth-organs, ill-played,
4 And murmur of voices, gruff, confused, and low.
5 Crouched among thistle-tufts I've watched the glow
6 Of a blurred orange sunset flare and fade;
7 And I'm content. To-morrow we must go
8 To take some cursèd Wood O world God made!

July 3rd, 1916.

BATTALION RELIEF

1 "*Fall in! Now, get a move on!*" (Curse the rain.)
2 We splash away along the straggling village,
3 Out to the flat rich country green with June
4 And sunset flares across wet crops and tillage,
5 Blazing with splendour-patches. Harvest soon
6 Up in the Line. "*Perhaps the War'll be done*
7 *By Christmas-time. Keep smiling then, old son!*"

7 Here's the Canal: it's dusk; we cross the bridge.
8 "*Lead on there by platoons.*" The Line's a-glare
9 With shell-fire through the poplars; distant rattle
0 Of rifles and machine-guns. "*Fritz is there!*
1 *Christ, ain't it lively, Sergeant? Is't a battle?*"
2 More rain: the lightning blinks, and thunder rumbles.
3 "There's overhead artillery," some chap grumbles.

11 “*What’s all this mob, by the cross-road?*” (The guides)
12 “*Lead on with Number One*” (And off they go.)

13 “*Three-minute intervals.*” . . . Poor blundering files,
14 Sweating and blindly burdened; who’s to know
15 If death will catch them in those two dark miles?
16 (More rain.) “*Lead on, Headquarters.*”
(That’s the lot.)

17 “*Who’s that? O, Sergeant-major; don’t get shot!*
18 *And tell me, have we won this war or not?*”

THE DUG-OUT

1 Why do you lie with your legs ungainly huddled,
2 And one arm bent across your sullen cold
3 Exhausted face? It hurts my heart to watch you,
4 Deep-shadow’d from the candle’s guttering gold;
5 And you wonder why I shake you by the shoulder;
6 Drowsy, you mumble and sigh and turn your head
7 *You are too young to fall asleep for ever;*
8 *And when you sleep you remind me of the dead.*

THE REAR-GUARD

(Hindenburg Line, April 1917.)

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

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

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

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

I STOOD WITH THE DEAD

1 I stood with the Dead, so forsaken and still:
2 When dawn was grey I stood with the Dead.
3 And my slow heart said, "You must kill; you must kill:

4 Soldier, soldier, morning is red.”
5 On the shapes of the slain in their crumpled disgrace
6 I stared for a while through the thin cold rain
7 “O lad that I loved, there is rain on your face,
8 And your eyes are blurred and sick like the plain.”
9 I stood with the Dead They were dead; they were dead;
z My heart and my head beat a march of dismay;
8 And gusts of the wind came dulled by the guns
10 “Fall in!” I shouted; “Fall in for your pay!”

SUICIDE IN TRENCHES

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

5 In winter trenches, cowed and glum
6 With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
7 He put a bullet through his brain.
8 No one spoke of him again.

* * * * *

9 You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
z Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
8 Sneak home and pray you'll never know
10 The hell where youth and laughter go.

ATTACK

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

COUNTER-ATTACK

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

11 And then the rain began,—the jolly old rain!

12 A yawning soldier knelt against the bank,
13 Staring across the morning blar with fog;
14 He wondered when the Allemands would get busy;
15 And then, of course, they started with five-nines
16 Traversing, sure as fate, and never a dud.
17 Mute in the clamour of shells he watched them burst
18 Spouting dark earth and wire with gusts from hell,
19 While posturing giants dissolved in drifts of smoke.

20 He crouched and flinched, dizzy with galloping fear,
21 Sick for escape,—loathing the strangled horror
22 And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead.

23 An officer came blundering down the trench:
24 “Stand-to and man the fire-step!” On he went
25 Gasping and bawling, “Fire-step . . . counter-attack!”
26 Then the haze lifted. Bombing on the right
27 Down the old sap: machine-guns on the left;
28 And stumbling figures looming out in front.
29 “O Christ, they’re coming at us!” Bullets spat,
30 And he remembered his rifle . . . rapid fire . . .
31 And started blazing wildly . . . then a bang
32 Crumpled and spun him sideways, knocked him out
33 To grunt and wriggle: none heeded him; he choked
34 And fought the flapping veils of smothering gloom,
35 Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans
36 Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned,
37 Bleeding to death. The counter-attack had failed.

THE EFFECT

“The effect of our bombardment was terrific. One man told me he had never seen so many dead before.”

—*War Correspondent.*

1 “*He’d never seen so many dead before.*”
2 They sprawled in yellow daylight while he swore
3 And gasped and lugged his everlasting load
4 Of bombs along what once had been a road.
5 “*How peaceful are the dead.*”
6 Who put that silly gag in some one’s head?

7 “*He’d never seen so many dead before.*”
8 The lilting words danced up and down his brain,
9 While corpses jumped and capered in the rain.
10 No, no; he wouldn’t count them any more
11 The dead have done with pain:
12 They’ve choked; they can’t come back to life again.

13 When Dick was killed last week he looked like that,
14 Flapping along the fire-step like a fish,
15 After the blazing crump had knocked him flat
16 “*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?”

REMORSE

1 Lost in the swamp and welter of the pit,
2 He flounders off the duck-boards; only he knows
3 Each flash and spouting crash,—each instant lit
4 When gloom reveals the streaming rain. He goes
5 Heavily, blindly on. And, while he blunders,
6 “Could anything be worse than this?”—he wonders,
7 Remembering how he saw those Germans run,
8 Screaming for mercy among the stumps of trees:
9 Green-faced, they dodged and darted: there was one
10 Livid with terror, clutching at his knees
11 Our chaps were sticking ’em like pigs “O hell!”
12 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.”

IN AN UNDERGROUND DRESSING-STATION

1 Quietly they set their burden down: he tried
2 To grin; moaned; moved his head from side to side.
* * * * *
3 He gripped the stretcher; stiffened; glared; and screamed,
4 “O put my leg down, doctor, do!” (He’d got
5 A bullet in his ankle; and he’d been shot
6 Horribly through the guts.) The surgeon seemed
7 So kind and gentle, saying, above that crying,
8 “You *must* keep still, my lad.” But he was dying.

DIED OF WOUNDS

1 His wet, white face and miserable eyes
2 Brought nurses to him more than groans and sighs:
3 But hoarse and low and rapid rose and fell
4 His troubled voice: he did the business well.

5 The ward grew dark; but he was still complaining,
6 And calling out for "Dickie." "Curse the Wood!
7 It's time to go; O Christ, and what's the good?—
8 We'll never take it; and it's always raining."

9 I wondered where he'd been; then heard him shout,
10 "They snipe like hell! O Dickie, don't go out . . . "
11 I fell asleep . . . next morning he was dead;
12 And some Slight Wound lay smiling on his bed.

"THEY"

1 The Bishop tells us: "When the boys come back
2 They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
3 In a just cause: they lead the last attack
4 On Anti-Christ; their comrade's blood has bought
5 New right to breed an honourable race.
6 They have challenged Death and dared him face to face."

7 "We're none of us the same!" the boys reply.
8 "For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
9 Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
10 And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find

8 A chap who's served that hasn't found *some* change."
10 And the Bishop said; "The ways of God are strange!"

BASE DETAILS

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

LAMENTATIONS

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

THE GENERAL

1 “Good-morning; good-morning!” the General said
2 When we met him last week on our way to the Line,
3 Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of ’em dead,
4 And we’re cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
5 “He’s a cheery old card,” grunted Harry to Jack
6 As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
* * * * *
7 But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

HOW TO DIE

1 Dark clouds are smouldering into red
2 While down the craters morning burns.
3 The dying soldier shifts his head
4 To watch the glory that returns:
5 He lifts his fingers toward the skies
6 Where holy brightness breaks in flame;
7 Radiance reflected in his eyes,
8 And on his lips a whispered name.

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

EDITORIAL IMPRESSION

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

FIGHT TO A FINISH

1 The boys came back. Bands played and flags were flying,
2 And Yellow-Pressmen thronged the sunlit street
3 To cheer the soldiers who’d refrained from dying,
4 And hear the music of returning feet.
5 “Of all the thrills and ardours War has brought,
6 This moment is the finest.” (So they thought.)

7 Snapping their bayonets on to charge the mob,
8 Grim Fusiliers broke ranks with glint of steel.
9 At last the boys had found a cushy job.
* * * * *

7 I heard the Yellow-Pressmen grunt and squeal;
8 And with my trusty bombers turned and went
10 To clear those Junkers out of Parliament.

ATROCITIES

1 You told me, in your drunken-boasting mood,
2 How once you butchered prisoners. That was good!
3 I'm sure you felt no pity while they stood
4 Patient and cowed and scared, as prisoners should.

5 How did you do them in? Come, don't be shy:
6 You know I love to hear how Germans die,
7 Downstairs in dug-outs. "Camerad!" they cry;
8 Then squeal like stoats when bombs begin to fly.
* * * * *

9 And you? I know your record. You went sick
10 When orders looked unwholesome: then, with trick
8 And lie, you wangled home. And here you are,
10 Still talking big and boozing in a bar.

THE FATHERS

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

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

"BLIGHTERS"

1 The house is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
2 And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
3 Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
4 "We're sure the Kaiser loves the dear old Tanks!"

5 I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
6 Lurching to rag-time tunes, or "Home, sweet Home,"—
7 And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
8 To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

GLORY OF WOMEN

1 You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
2 Or wounded in a mentionable place.
3 You worship decorations; you believe
4 That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
5 You make us shells. You listen with delight,
6 By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
7 You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
8 And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.

9 You can't believe that British troops "retire"
10 When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
11 Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood.
12 *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

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

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

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

DOES IT MATTER?

1 Does it matter?—losing your legs? . . .
2 For people will always be kind,
3 And you need not show that you mind
4 When the others come in after football
5 To gobble their muffins and eggs.

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

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

SURVIVORS

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

Craiglockhart, *Oct. 1917.*

JOY-BELLS

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

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

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

ARMS AND THE MAN

1 Young Croesus went to pay his call
2 On Colonel Sawbones, Caxton Hall:
3 And, though his wound was healed and mended,
4 He hoped he'd get his leave extended.

5 The waiting-room was dark and bare.
6 He eyed a neat-framed notice there
7 Above the fireplace hung to show
8 Disabled heroes where to go
9 For arms and legs; with scale of price,
7 And words of dignified advice
8 How officers could get them free.

10 Elbow or shoulder, hip or knee,—
11 Two arms, two legs, though all were lost,
12 They'd be restored him free of cost.

13 Then a Girl-Guide looked in to say,
14 "Will Captain Croesus come this way?"

WHEN I'M AMONG A BLAZE OF LIGHTS. . .

1 When I'm among a blaze of lights,
2 With tawdry music and cigars
3 And women dawdling through delights,
4 And officers at cocktail bars,—

5 Sometimes I think of garden nights
6 And elm trees nodding at the stars.

7 I dream of a small firelit room
8 With yellow candles burning straight,
9 And glowing pictures in the gloom,
10 And kindly books that hold me late.
11 Of things like these I love to think
12 When I can never be alone:
13 Then some one says, "Another drink?"—
14 And turns my living heart to stone.

THE KISS

1 To these I turn, in these I trust;
2 Brother Lead and Sister Steel.
3 To his blind power I make appeal;
4 I guard her beauty clean from rust.

5 He spins and burns and loves the air,
6 And splits a skull to win my praise;
7 But up the nobly marching days
8 She glitters naked, cold and fair.

9 Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this;
10 That in good fury he may feel
11 The body where he sets his heel
12 Quail from your downward darting kiss.

THE TOMBSTONE-MAKER

1 He primmed his loose red mouth, and leaned his head
2 Against a sorrowing angel's breast, and said:
3 "You'd think so much bereavement would have made
4 Unusual big demands upon my trade.
5 The War comes cruel hard on some poor folk—
6 Unless the fighting stops I'll soon be broke."

7 He eyed the Cemetery across the road—
8 "There's scores of bodies out abroad, this while,
9 That should be here by rights; they little know'd
0 How they'd get buried in such wretched style."

1 I told him, with a sympathetic grin,
2 That Germans boil dead soldiers down for fat;
3 And he was horrified. "What shameful sin!
4 O sir, that Christian men should come to that!"

THE ONE-LEGGED MAN

1 Propped on a stick he viewed the August weald;
2 Squat orchard trees and oasts with painted cowls;
3 A homely, tangled hedge, a corn-stooked field,
4 With sound of barking dogs and farmyard fowls.

5 And he'd come home again to find it more
6 Desirable than ever it was before.
7 How right it seemed that he should reach the span
8 Of comfortable years allowed to man!

4 They're standing in the sun, impassive and erect.
5 Young Gibson with his grin; and Morgan, tired and white;
6 Jordan, who's out to win a D.C.M. some night:
7 And Hughes that's keen on wiring; and Davies ('79),
8 Who always must be firing at the Boche front line.

* * * * *

9 "Old soldiers never die; they simply fide a-why!"
10 That's what they used to sing along the roads last spring;
11 That's what they used to say before the push began;
12 That's where they are to-day, knocked over to a man.

TO ANY DEAD OFFICER

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

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

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

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

29 Good-bye, old lad! Remember me to God,
30 And tell Him that our Politicians swear
31 They won't give in till Prussian Rule's been trod
32 Under the Heel of England Are you there? . . .
33 Yes . . . and the War won't end for at least two years;
34 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

1 When I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm,—
2 They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead.
3 While the dim charging breakers of the storm
4 Bellow and drone and rumble overhead,
5 Out of the gloom they gather about my bed.
6 They whisper to my heart; their thoughts are mine.
7 “Why are you here with all your watches ended?
8 From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the Line.”
9 In bitter safety I awake, unfriended;
10 And while the dawn begins with slashing rain
11 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

1 I am banished from the patient men who fight.
2 They smote my heart to pity, built my pride.
3 Shoulder to aching shoulder, side by side,
4 They trudged away from life's broad wealds of light.
5 Their wrongs were mine; and ever in my sight
6 They went arrayed in honour. But they died,—
7 Not one by one: and mutinous I cried
8 To those who sent them out into the night.
9 The darkness tells how vainly I have striven
10 To free them from the pit where they must dwell
11 In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven

10 By grappling guns. Love drove me to rebel.
11 Love drives me back to grope with them through hell;
12 And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven.

AUTUMN

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

REPRESSION OF WAR EXPERIENCE

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

7 Draw a deep breath; stop thinking; count fifteen,
8 And you're as right as rain . . . Why won't it rain? . . .
10 I wish there'd be a thunder-storm to-night,
11 With bucketsful of water to sluice the dark,
12 And make the roses hang their dripping heads.

13 Books; what a jolly company they are,
14 Standing so quiet and patient on their shelves,
15 Dressed in dim brown, and black, and white, and green
16 And every kind of colour. Which will you read?
17 Come on; O *do* read something; they're so wise.
18 I tell you all the wisdom of the world
19 Is waiting for you on those shelves; and yet
20 You sit and gnaw your nails, and let your pipe out,
21 And listen to the silence: on the ceiling
22 There's one big, dizzy moth that bumps and flutters;
23 And in the breathless air outside the house
24 The garden waits for something that delays.
25 There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees,—
26 Not people killed in battle,—they're in France,—
27 But horrible shapes in shrouds—old men who died
28 Slow, natural deaths,—old men with ugly souls,
29 Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins.

* * * * *

28 You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;
29 You'd never think there was a bloody war on! . . .
30 O yes, you would . . . why, you can hear the guns.
31 Hark! Thud, thud, thud,—quite soft . . . they never cease—
32 Those whispering guns—O Christ, I want to go out
33 And screech at them to stop—I'm going crazy;
34 I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

TOGETHER

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

8 He's jumped each stile along the glistening lanes;
9 His hand will be upon the mud-soaked reins;
10 Hearing the saddle creak,
11 He'll wonder if the frost will come next week.
12 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.

THE HAWTHORN TREE

1 Not much to me is yonder lane
2 Where I go every day;
3 But when there's been a shower of rain
4 And hedge-birds whistle gay,
5 I know my lad that's out in France
6 With fearsome things to see
7 Would give his eyes for just one glance
8 At our white hawthorn tree.
 * * * * *

9 Not much to me is yonder lane

7 Where *he* so longs to tread;
8 But when there's been a shower of rain
10 I think I'll never weep again
11 Until I've heard he's dead.

CONCERT PARTY

(EGYPTIAN BASE CAMP)

1 They are gathering round . . .
2 Out of the twilight; over the grey-blue sand,
3 Shoals of low-jargoning men drift inward to the sound,—
4 The jangle and throb of a piano . . . tum-ti-tum . . .
5 Drawn by a lamp, they come
6 Out of the glimmering lines of their tents, over the shuffling sand.

7 O sing us the songs, the songs of our own land,
8 You warbling ladies in white.
9 Dimness conceals the hunger in our faces,
10 This wall of faces risen out of the night,
11 These eyes that keep their memories of the places
12 So long beyond their sight.

13 Jaded and gay, the ladies sing; and the chap in brown
14 Tilts his grey hat; jaunty and lean and pale,
15 He rattles the keys . . . some actor-bloke from town . . .

16 “*God send you home*”; and then “*A long, long trail*”;
17 “*I hear you catting me*”; and “*Dixieland*” . . .
18 Sing slowly . . . now the chorus . . . one by one

17 We hear them, drink them; till the concert's done.
18 Silent, I watch the shadowy mass of soldiers stand.
19 Silent, they drift away, over the glimmering sand.

Kantara, *April, 1918.*

NIGHT ON THE CONVOY

(ALEXANDRIA-MARSEILLES)

1 Out in the blustering darkness, on the deck
2 A gleam of stars looks down. Long blurs of black,
3 The lean Destroyers, level with our track,
4 Plunging and stealing, watch the perilous way
5 Through backward racing seas and caverns of chill spray.

6 One sentry by the davits, in the gloom
7 Stands mute; the boat heaves onward through the night.
8 Shrouded is every chink of cabined light:
9 And sluiced by floundering waves that hiss and boom
10 And crash like guns, the troop-ship shudders . . . doom.

11 Now something at my feet stirs with a sigh;
12 And slowly growing used to groping dark,
13 I know that the hurricane-deck, down all its length,
14 Is heaped and spread with lads in sprawling strength,—
15 Blanketed soldiers sleeping. In the stark
16 Danger of life at war, they lie so still,
17 All prostrate and defenceless, head by head . . .
18 And I remember Arras, and that hill

17 Where dumb with pain I stumbled among the dead.
* * * * *
18 We are going home. The troop-ship, in a thrill
19 Of fiery-chamber'd anguish, throbs and rolls.
120 We are going home . . . victims . . . three thousand souls.

May, 1918.

A LETTER HOME

(TO ROBERT GRAVES)

I

1 Here I'm sitting in the gloom
2 Of my quiet attic room.
3 France goes rolling all around,
4 Fledged with forest May has crowned.
5 And I puff my pipe, calm-hearted,
6 Thinking how the fighting started,
7 Wondering when we'll ever end it,
8 Back to Hell with Kaiser send it,
9 Gag the noise, pack up and go,
20 Clockwork soldiers in a row.
8 I've got better things to do
10 Than to waste my time on you.

II

11 Robert, when I drowse to-night,

12 Skirting lawns of sleep to chase
13 Shifting dreams in mazy light,
14 Somewhere then I'll see your face
15 Turning back to bid me follow
16 Where I wag my arms and hollo,
17 Over hedges hasting after
18 Crooked smile and baffling laughter,
19 Running tireless, floating, leaping,
20 Down your web-hung woods and valleys,
21 Garden glooms and hornbeam alleys,
22 Where the glowworm stars are peeping,
23 Till I find you, quiet as stone
24 On a hill-top all alone,
25 Staring outward, gravely pondering
26 Jumbled leagues of hillock-wandering.

III

25 You and I have walked together
26 In the starving winter weather.
27 We've been glad because we knew
28 Time's too short and friends are few.
29 We've been sad because we missed
30 One whose yellow head was kissed
31 By the gods, who thought about him
32 Till they couldn't do without him.
33 Now he's here again; I've seen
34 Soldier David dressed in green,
35 Standing in a wood that swings
36 To the madrigal he sings.
37 He's come back, all mirth and glory,
38 Like the prince in a fairy story.

37 Winter called him far away;
38 Blossoms bring him home with May.

IV

39 Well, I know you'll swear it's true
39 That you found him decked in blue
38 Striding up through morning-land
40 With a cloud on either hand.
41 Out in Wales, you'll say, he marches
42 Arm-in-arm with oaks and larches;
43 Hides all night in hilly nooks,
44 Laughs at dawn in tumbling brooks.
45 Yet, it's certain, here he teaches
46 Outpost-schemes to groups of beeches.
47 And I'm sure, as here I stand,
48 That he shines through every land,
49 That he sings in every place
47 Where we're thinking of his face.

V

48 Robert, there's a war in France;
50 Everywhere men bang and blunder,
51 Sweat and swear and worship Chance,
52 Creep and blink through cannon thunder.
53 Rifles crack and bullets flick,
54 Sing and hum like hornet-swarms.
55 Bones are smashed and buried quick.
56 Yet, through stunning battle storms.
57 All the while I watch the spark
58 Lit to guide me; for I know
59 Dreams will triumph, though the dark

57 Scowls above me where I go.
58 *You* can hear me; *you* can mingle
60 Radiant folly with my jingle,
61 War's a joke for me and you
62 While we know such dreams are true!

RECONCILIATION

1 When you are standing at your hero's grave,
2 Or near some homeless village where he died,
3 Remember, through your heart's rekindling pride,
4 The German soldiers who were loyal and brave.

5 Men fought like brutes; and hideous things were done:
6 And you have nourished hatred, harsh and blind.
7 But in that Golgotha perhaps you'll find
8 The mothers of the men who killed your son.

November, 1918.

MEMORIAL TABLET

(GREAT WAR)

1 Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight
2 (Under Lord Derby's scheme). I died in hell—
3 (They called it Passchendaele); my wound was slight,
4 And I was hobbling back, and then a shell

5 Burst slick upon the duck-boards; so I fell
6 Into the bottomless mud, and lost the light.

7 In sermon-time, while Squire is in his pew,
8 He gives my gilded name a thoughtful stare;
9 For though low down upon the list, I'm there:
10 "In proud and glorious memory"—that's my due.
11 Two bleeding years I fought in France for Squire;
12 I suffered anguish that he's never guessed;
13 Once I came home on leave; and then went west.
14 What greater glory could a man desire?

THE DEATH-BED

1 He drowsed and was aware of silence heaped
2 Round him, unshaken as the steadfast walls;
3 Aqueous like floating rays of amber light,
4 Soaring and quivering in the wings of sleep,—
5 Silence and safety; and his mortal shore
6 Lipped by the inward, moonless waves of death.

7 Some one was holding water to his mouth.
8 He swallowed, unresisting; moaned and dropped
9 Through crimson gloom to darkness; and forgot
10 The opiate throb and ache that was his wound.
11 Water—calm, sliding green above the weir;
12 Water—a sky-lit alley for his boat,
13 Bird-voiced, and bordered with reflected flowers
14 And shaken hues of summer: drifting down,
15 He dipped contented oars, and sighed, and slept.

14 Night, with a gust of wind, was in the ward,
15 Blowing the curtain to a glimmering curve.
16 Night. He was blind; he could not see the stars
17 Glinting among the wraiths of wandering cloud;
18 Queer blots of colour, purple, scarlet, green,
19 Flickered and faded in his drowning eyes.

16 Rain; he could hear it rustling through the dark;
18 Fragrance and passionless music woven as one;
20 Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers
21 That soak the woods; not the harsh rain that sweeps
22 Behind the thunder, but a trickling peace
23 Gently and slowly washing life away.

* * * *

24 He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain
25 Leaped like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore
26 His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.
27 But some one was beside him; soon he lay
28 Shuddering because that evil thing had passed.
29 And Death, who'd stepped toward him, paused and stared.

26 Light many lamps and gather round his bed.
28 Lend him your eyes, warm blood, and will to live.
30 Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.
31 He's young; he hated war; how should he die
32 When cruel old campaigners win safe through?

33 But Death replied: "I choose him." So he went,
34 And there was silence in the summer night;
35 Silence and safety; and the veils of sleep.
36 Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.

AFTERMATH

1 *Have you forgotten yet? . . .* For the world's events have rumbled on
since those gagged days,
2 Like traffic checked awhile at the crossing of city ways:
3 And the haunted gap in your mind has filled with thoughts that
flow
4 Like clouds in the lit heavens of life; and you're a man reprieved
to go,
5 Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.
6 *But the past is just the same,—and War's a bloody game, . . .*
7 *Have you forgotten yet? . . .*
8 *Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never forget.*

7 Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz,—
8 The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on
parapets?
9 Do you remember the rats; and the stench
10 Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench,—
11 And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?
12 Do you ever stop and ask, "Is it all going to happen again?"
11 Do you remember that hour of din before the attack,—
12 And the anger, the blind compassion that seized and shook you
then
13 As you peered at the doomed and haggard faces of your men?
14 Do you remember the stretcher-cases lurching back
15 With dying eyes and lolling heads,—those ashen-grey
16 Masks of the lads who once were keen and kind and gay?
17 *Have you forgotten yet? . . . Look up, and swear by the green of the Spring
that you'll never forget.*

SONG-BOOKS OF THE WAR

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

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

EVERYONE SANG

1 Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
2 And I was filled with such delight
3 As prisoned birds must find in freedom
4 Winging wildly across the white
5 Orchards and dark green fields; on; on; and out of sight.

6 Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted,
7 And beauty came like the setting sun.
8 My heart was shaken with tears and horror
9 Drifted away . . . O but every one
0 Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be
done.

April, 1919.

CONSCRIPTS

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

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

10 Reproachful; how I longed to set them free!
11 I gave them lectures on Defence, Attack;
12 They fidgeted and shuffled, yawned and sighed,
13 And boggled at my questions. Joy was slack,
14 And Wisdom gnawed his fingers, gloomy-eyed.
15 Young Fancy—how I loved him all the while—
16 Stared at his note-book with a rueful smile.

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

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

THE INVESTITURE

1 God with a Roll of Honour in His hand
2 Sits welcoming the heroes who have died,
3 While sorrowless angels ranked on either side
4 Stand easy in Elysium's meadow-land.
5 Then *you* come shyly through the garden gate,

6 Wearing a blood-soaked bandage on your head;
7 And God says something kind because you're dead,
8 And homesick, discontented with your fate.

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

THRUSHES

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

INVOCATION

1 Come down from heaven to meet me when my breath
2 Chokes, and through drumming shafts of stifling death

3 I stumble toward escape, to find the door
4 Opening on morn where I may breathe once more
5 Clear cock-crow airs across some valley dim
6 With whispering trees. While dawn along the rim
7 Of night's horizon flows in lakes of fire,
8 Come down from heaven's bright hill, my song's desire.

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

THE TRIUMPH

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

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

DEAD MUSICIANS

I

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

II

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

III

17 For when my brain is on their track,
18 In slangy speech I call them back.
19 With fox-trot tunes their ghosts I charm.
20 "*Another little drink won't do us any harm.*"
21 *I think of rag-time; a bit of rag-time;*
22 *And see their faces crowding round*

18 *To the sound of the syncopated beat.*
19 *They've got such jolly things to tell,*
20 *Home from hell with a Blighty wound so neat . . .*

* * * * *

19 And so the song breaks off; and I'm alone.
20 They're dead . . . For God's sake stop that gramophone.

IN BARRACKS

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

9 Fall out: the long parades are done.
10 Up comes the dark; down goes the sun.
11 The square is walled with windowed light.
12 Sleep well, you lusty Fusiliers;
13 Shut your brave eyes on sense and sight,
14 And banish from your dreamless ears
15 The bugle's lying notes that say,
16 "Another night; another day."

THE LOST “ATROCITIES”

IN 1189, A PREVIOUSLY unknown first draft of “Atrocities” was discovered, in much stronger and more savage language than the version eventually published. The original poem, still unpolished (the meter doesn’t work in places, for example), is reproduced here. It is powerful in a way that the published version, itself quite good, simply isn’t. Lines 11 and 12 are especially moving.

1 You bragged how once in savage mood
2 Your men butchered some Saxon prisoners; that was good.
3 I trust you felt no pity as they stood
4 Patient and cowed and scared as prisoners should.
5 How did you kill them? speak now, don’t be shy,
6 You know I love to hear how Germans die
7 Downstairs in dug-outs, ‘Camerad!’ they cry;
8 And squeal like stoats when bombs begin to fly.
9 I’m proud of you; perhaps you’ll feel as brave
10 Alone in no-man’s land when no one can shield you from the
11 horror of the night.
12 There’s blood upon your hands
13 Now go out and fight.
14 I hope those Huns will haunt you with their screams
15 And make you gulp their blood in ghoulish dreams.
16 You’re great at murder; tell me, can you fight?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND TEXT

SIEGFRIED SASSOON WAS the son of Alfred Sassoon, a member of a wealthy Jewish family, and Theresa, née Thornycroft, an Anglican. Siegfried was the second of three sons, being born in 1112 (1886.), in England. His parents separated early in his life, and when Siegfried was still a child, his father died of tuberculosis.

Though the Sassoons were a wealthy family, Alfred had been cut off financially when he married a non-Jew; nevertheless, Siegfried had a sufficient fortune to live without working. So in his youth he played a great deal of cricket and wrote a great deal of poetry. His verse at this time was decidedly Romantic in style, focusing on bucolic and idyllic topics.

However, in his fervent patriotism he joined the army in 1136 (1914.), and was in service when the war began. Due to an accidental injury, he was not put into action until the next year, 1137, in France. That same year his younger brother was killed at Gallipoli. He was well-known for his bravery at the front, his men naming him “Mad Jack” for his incredible courage under fire, and he was decorated in 1138 with the Military Cross

For conspicuous gallantry during a raid on the enemy’s trenches. He remained for 1½ hours under rifle and bomb fire collecting and bringing in our wounded. Owing to his courage and determination all the killed and wounded were brought in.

Despite such bravery and recognition, however, Siegfried became

increasingly disillusioned with the war, and with patriotism in general. His poetry became, in contrast to its previous nature, very dark, very powerful, and very grim. Death, suicide, bravery, cowardice, cruelty, brutality, and the general perceived pointlessness of it became his primary topics. The anguish and suffering that Siegfried experienced in the trenches brought out by far his most compelling verse, contained in these pages.

Innumerable great poets arose from the bloodthirsty mess that was the First World War; but Siegfried Sassoon was the most famous of them during the war, and arguably most poignantly and eloquently expressed the agonies that so many experienced in it. As another such poet and writer, J.R.R. Tolkien, stated:

One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth in 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead.¹

Despite all this anguish and brutality, Siegfried never lost his compassion. “Reconciliation,” for example, asks readers to “[r]emember, through your heart’s rekindling pride, / The German soldiers who were loyal and brave.” His work “Atrocities” shows an incredible sympathy for his wartime enemy, and indeed Siegfried was deeply troubled for the rest of his days by the atrocities his own side committed during the war. Most powerfully, in his original draft of “Atrocities,” Siegfried tells those who were cruel to German prisoners, “I hope those Huns will haunt you with their screams / And make you gulp their blood in ghoulish dreams.” His heart was quite open, given that he had seen enough to close many more than his.

¹*The Lord of the Rings*, Preface to the Second Edition.

Though Siegfried met considerable success after the war, he never escaped it, and it haunted him for the rest of his days. “Repression of War Experience” is perhaps the best example of how difficult it was to continue living after having endured such horrors:

- 1 You’re quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;
- 2 You’d never think there was a bloody war on! . . .
- 3 O yes, you would . . . why, you can hear the guns.
- 4 Hark! Thud, thud, thud,—quite soft . . . they never cease—

In the end, Siegfried finally found comfort and meaning in all his suffering, and in the suffering so many faced during and after the “Great” War, in the only place it can ever be found: the Faith. Through Msgr. Ronald Knox and Hilaire Belloc, he became interested in Catholicism, and was eventually received into the Church in 1171 (1957.). Here, he at last found comfort, and was able to impress a meaning on the horrific agony that gave rise to the deeply moving verse now contained in these pages. I sincerely hope that readers find these poems as powerful as I did when assembling them.

The biographical information in this appendix comes largely from Wikipedia, and from “Siegfried Sassoon: A Poet’s Pilgrimage,” by Joseph Pearce, reprinted from Lay Witness at catholicauthors.com.

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COLOPHON

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