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Soliloquies of a Subaltern

SOMEWHERE
IN FRANCE



BY
ERIC THIRKELL COOPER







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SOLILOQUIES OF A SUBALTERN

Cooper, Eric T.

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A SUBALTERN

SOMEWHERE
IN FRANCE

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TO THE 2ND BATTALION LONDON REGIMENT
ROYAL FUSILIERS T.F.

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INTRODUCTION

THE Poet's nearly always broke
By reason of his bent,
So all that he can do is joke,
A poor accomplishment ;
But as the times are very bad—
And he goes with the times—
He trusts you'll give the eye that's glad
To these resistless rhymes.

THE SUBALTERN'S PRAYER

HERE, like an infant, may I sleep
Secure from all alarm,
For though I've never done much good,
I've never done much harm.
May sentries smart their watches take
On guard at every gate,
And when I really have to wake,
Please blow "Réveillé" late.

CARRY ON

WHEN the ammunition's low, carry on.
When a volunteer must go, carry on.
When you feel that you must rest
Or you'll have to journey west,
Stop your grousing, do your best, carry on.

When the parapet goes "phut," carry on.
When the telephone is cut, carry on.
When the "wind up" seems to spread,
Let the others lose their head,
Have a cigarette instead; carry on.

DAWN IN THE TRENCHES

DAWN o' day! And birds a-singing;
Sniping starts along the line;
"Stand to all" comes quickly ringing,
"Pray the coming day is fine;
Mind the pools from last night's drizzle,
Post 'day-sentries' straight away——"
Rifles cleaned whilst rashers frizzle—
So to us comes break o' day.

NIGHT IN THE TRENCHES

STAR-SHELLS rising all around us,
Watch the searchlights come this way,
Bullets whirring, zipping round us
From the rifles laid by day;
Pop, pop, pop, a Maxim tapping,
Just to show it's working right,
Lest its crew should be caught napping,
So they try it every night.
Out in front a hammer knocking,
Somebody is fixing "wire";
Hear the peewit sadly mocking;
Men in front now—Do not fire!
Working party just returning,
Digging finished for a while;
Stopped because a house was burning—
Through they pass in single file;
Strain your eyes to pierce the blackness,
Whilst your feet are growing numb,
Death may come through one man's slackness—
Night and death together come.

“THE MERCY SHIP”

ABOVE the distant skyline by degrees,
Snow-white and shining in the peaceful sun,
The Mercy Ship appears upon the seas

With those whose fighting for a while is done;
Yet some there be that struggle still with pain,
And agony too terrible for speech,
And some there be who'll never fight again,
Who've journeyed where no enemy can reach.

O winds be merciful, O waves be kind,
To these poor victims of a mad mankind.

No cheers to greet, no friendly flag to dip,
No crowded quay—in silence she arrives;
Such is the coming of the Mercy Ship,
With all her honoured freight of human lives.
And one by one the wounded reach the shore,
Till all have passed—then, stately and serene—
The Mercy Ship returns to bear once more
The broken martyrs of the War Machine.

O winds be merciful, O waves be kind,
To these poor victims of a mad mankind.

“ AS THEY REMEMBERED ”

AS they remembered plighted word, as they
remembered Truth,
Because of those they massacred, the aged and the
youth,

By all the deeds Thy Rolls record,
Remember them in turn, O Lord!

The treachery with which they've tricked, the
mercy they've withheld,

The countless tortures they inflict—the wounded
that they've shelled;

For all that's made their name abhorred,
Wilt Thou remember them, O Lord!

THE NIGHT ATTACK

CLOSE behind a wall of sandbags, covered
up with yellow mud,
In a trench that seems perpetually wet,
Stands a line of weary figures, all begrimed with
dirt and blood,
And their tired faces grimly stern and set;
With their rifles "laid" and ready for the night
that's coming soon,
They gather round the braziers for tea,
Whilst the subaltern lies resting who's in charge of
the platoon,
Preparing for the night that is to be.

When the rifle bolts are tested, and the sentries have
been set,
When the night is only lightened by the flares,
He leads a little party through the darkness, black
as jet,
And creeps to catch the Deutschers unawares;

With the fuse attached beforehand on the improvised grenade

They slowly crawl towards the German wire,
And a few went softly cursing, and a few there
were that prayed,

Whilst they waited there for Fritz to open fire.

Then they cut the wire in places, and a bomb was
swiftly hurled,

A Maxim farther down began to pop;
And a little knot of Prussians went to find another
world,

As another bomb went spinning overtop;
Down the trench the rifles volleyed, though they
mostly went too high,

But here and there a figure lay and cursed,
Yet only very softly, so as not to signify,

And a second line of shadows joined the first.
Quickly star shells flew around them, bursting
brilliant as the sun,

A yelling line found where the gap was blown;
Scarlet bayonets quickly finished what a dead man
had begun;

And next day some widowed women wept alone.

GHOSTS

OUT of the night there came a dream—
A great procession, vague and dim,
Half hid by mist—a hazy stream
Of passing figures, dumb and grim.
At first there came the tramp of many feet,
And countless thousands passed into the night
All sorely hurt—an army clad in grey—
Who marched in stricken silence out of sight.

*This is the dream an Emperor beheld
When he was old and overcome with years,
When death seemed unaccountably withheld,
And life became too terrible for tears.*

Behind them marched the Belgians who had died
For other lands, but firstly for their own,
And unforgettably had fought and tried
To beat the great invader back alone.
And after them the ravaged and the raped;
Wee babies with their mothers; and the old
Who died, and by their dying have escaped
A misery too bitter to be told.

Non-combatants within the danger zone,
Whose harmless lives were taken without cause,
With staring, sightless eyes to the Unknown,
The Legions of the Dead go by—and then a
pause,
Ere dank and wet, fresh dripping from the deep,
The great procession of the drowned goes by;
Women and children murdered while asleep
Pass, as the rest have passed, without a cry.

Behind them march rank after rank again,
Shoulder to shoulder, even as they fell,
In blue or khaki; these that once were men,
The heroes of the poison-gas and shell;
With groping hands the rearmost disappeared
Into the darkness, silent as they'd come,
Poor shattered remnants, torn and blood-besmeared,
Leaving the Dreamer trembling, stricken dumb.

Then spoke a Voice where silence was before:
“ This vision showed thy victims without count,
The death of all these lies at thy door—
O Emperor prepare to give account! ”

NAPOLEON'S BUGLE

"Napoleon is dead, but his spirit never dies."

HALF hidden by a coat of moss and grime,
Old, battered, bent and scarred by many wars
A bugle lies, forgotten for a time,
The sole survivor of a mighty cause.

The call that rang through years of blood and flame,
And chilled the shrinking souls of gallant men,
Is waiting silent for some lips to frame
Those deathless notes in sunny France again.

Then all the gallant dead who ever heard,
And, even dying, cheered that thrilling call,
Will rise, and stand expectant for a word
From him who was the greatest of them all.

Through trembling worlds its echoes will resound,
Teaching the bravest what it is to fear,
Whilst in his France the cry goes blazing round,
"To arms! to arms! the Emperor is here!"

THE QUIET WAY

THE panoply of War has passed,
Experience and time have both combined.
New ways, new means push back the past
And change the custom of our ancestors.
We leave the colours and the bands behind,
In the great work of killing, men call wars.

Symbolic drab replaces, now,
The gold and scarlet of our fathers' days.
Though the same look on every brow,
Remains unaltered as each war begins.
And we retain, despite our modern traits,
The quiet way—the quiet way that wins.

THE SERGEANT'S SORROW

WHEN I left my little business in the under-
taking line,

Down at Fulham, close by where the buses stop,
Where the weather, if uncertain, was occasionally
fine,

And a hair-cut was a hair-cut—not a crop;
I never thought that I should come to rough it like
I do,

With only just a blanket for a bed,
And a “menoo” which for seven days a week is
only stew,

Or bear a pack like concentrated lead.
I didn't dream that I should come to Spratts instead
of toast,

And never see a cigarette for weeks,
But still I find I stand it all as easily as most,
And laugh—although my water-bottle leaks;
I can do my turn in trenches, when I have to, till
relief;

But there's something worries me more than the
slosh;

I'd almost sacrifice my chance of going home on
leave—

If I could get a really decent wash.

LINES TO A RISE IN PAY

AUTHORITIES that sway my working hours,
And bring me sometimes roughly back to earth,
It's nice to think at last, O Higher Powers,
You've realized my true and proper worth.

The stipend that till now you used to pay,
(If that poor sum can be entitled such),
Has been increased by two and three a day,
Which is not, honoured sirs, at *all* too much.

In thanking you, there's one small point I've saved
To grumble at—though grumbling is hateful,
It's this, if Income Tax was kindly waived
You'd make poor Subalterns *extremely* grateful.

The sum that you derive would not be missed,
And I would add for your consideration,
Our private incomes really don't exist
Except in someone's weird imagination.

So, as we've entered once into your brain,
Please think once more, O Powers, and help again.

THE CANARY-COLOURED CHARGER

A R.A.M. Corps Rhyme

THE Doctor's horse was mettlesome,
It was his sole delight;
Though frolicsome and fettlesome,
Unluckily 'twas white.
This made the medico distressed,
The world seemed all awry,
Until one evening he confessed,
That animal must dye.
The colour scheme did not succeed,
The plan went quite contrary,
Instead of brown, his trusty steed
Became a bright canary.
Thereafter when he rode abroad
A ribald whisper flew,
Whilst Tommies tittered, captains roared
And urged a dry shampoo.
The rumour was he murmured "cheep"
Instead of saying "whoa,"
And gave it groundsels in a heap
To make the beggar grow.

Once more the Doctor had it dyed,
 Whilst everybody watches,
But when the wretched creature dried
 The beast came out in splotches.
So if you need a noble steed,
 And do not mind its shade,
A cheap one can be guaranteed—
 For sale in our brigade.

THE TORPEDO BOAT DESTROYERS

THE playground of the T.B.D.'s
Is out upon the billows,
Their roadway is the great High Seas,
The tossing deep their pillows.
They penetrate the waterways
In search for the foe unseen,
And when they meet on that Day of Days
It's death for the submarine—
Quick death for the submarine.

And what of the men of the T.B.D.'s
Who fought through winter weather?
Through storm and cold in Northern Seas
Fought ships and men together.
They come from shores where men are made
On a plain and stalwart plan,
Seafarers all, of every grade
From cook to midshipman.

They hunt the wildest waterways
In search of the foe unseen,

And when they meet on that Day of Days
It's death to the submarine—
Quick death to the submarine.

So when you drink your nightly toast
In comfortable arm-chairs,
Remember them around the coast,
And also in your prayers;
For savage seas they fight upon
Their duty to fulfil,
But him they hope to fight anon
Is more ferocious still.

They hunt the wildest waterways
In search of the foe unseen,
And when they meet on that Day of Days
It's death for the submarine—
Quick death for the submarine.

PLUM AND APPLE

Humbly dedicated to Mr. Tickler.

THE A.S.C have strawberry,
Or sometimes marmalade;
For us, it always seems to me,
No other jam is made—
But Plum and Apple, Plum and Apple,
Oh, the times I've had to grapple
With my tin of Plum and Apple!

When wounded in a recent "spree,"
To hospital I went;
They said a little jam for tea
Is splendid nourishment—
'Twas Plum and Apple, Plum and Apple,
Once again I had to grapple
With some Tickler's Plum and Apple.

A little jelly would be nice,
To those at home I wrote;
They sent it to me in a trice;

It stuck half down my throat—

'Twas Plum and Apple, Plum and Apple,
Jelly true, but—**PLUM AND APPLE.**

CORPORALS IN CLOVER

CORP'RAL Curling had a billet
All the N.C.O.'s desired,
Which he shared with Corp'ral Willet,
When for resting they retired.

There a piano, smartly mended,
Made the house a paradise;
And the cooking was so splendid,
Even rations tasted nice.

But the thing we envied more
Than the way in which they fed,
Was that on an upper floor
They had found a single bed.

There in turns they used to slumber,
Till one night they disagreed,
And it needed quite a number
Of the police to intercede.

Corp'ral Curling was degraded,
So, alas! was Corp'ral Willet.

And the Germans serenaded
Their most comfortable billet.

Now they're telling their relations,
Neither bearing any malice,
Though they hate exaggerations,
Out in France they had a palace.

“THE CONTEMPTIBLE ARMY”

*(Humbly dedicated to H.I.M the German
Emperor)*

NO over-medalled Army ours,
To plunder, rape, or loot;
Or call upon Celestial Powers
As partners, while we shoot.

No little children dread our name;
For us no women pale;
And undefended towns aflame
Mark only “culture’s” trail.

Perhaps our knighthood hasn’t shone,
Whilst churches burn and fall;
We’re just content to carry on
As ordered—that is all.

Contemptible—you’re scarcely right;
Not numerous—that’s true!
Nor good at talk, but when we fight
More than enough for you!

THE WOMEN'S SHARE

NOT ours the greater glory, or the praise,
Not ours the danger, Lord, nor yet the pain,
Although we share in all of these in ways
Which seem ordained for women to sustain.
Ours but the waiting part, and ours to give,
To patiently endure, without a word;
And, if our dearest die, 'tis ours to live
Though death may be a thousandfold preferred.
The history of our times won't mention us,
'Tis so indeed that we would have it be;
Let men have all that may seem glorious,
Let us but feel our part is known to Thee.

BLIND

GOD, Who gave the world its fairness,
Swooning seas and ardent skies;
Fashioned it with every rareness
That could dazzle human eyes;
God, Who gave me all of these,
Help me do without them, please.

Giver of the light and flowers,
Running stream and forest tree,
Help me through the heavy hours,
When I think what others see.
God, who took my sight away,
Help me do without it, pray.

“KILLED IN ACTION”

(To a Mother)

WHAT preparation can I write
To warn you of your loss?
To mitigate in black and white
The burden of the cross?

These little things kept separate—
His diary half begun;
How can these trifles compensate
A mother for her son!

The consolation men might seek
In knowing how he died
Seems so inadequate and weak
Where sorrow weighs down pride.

The Mother of all Sons bestow
All grace and comfort, till
The bidding comes for you to go
Where men no longer kill!

TO "F. L. R.," 26/4/15, IN FRANCE

YOU with the boyish laugh; the sunny eyes
That always smiled when danger threatened
worst;

Would you have had things ordered otherwise
If death could be prevented, Fate reversed?

You were so bright, we brightened 'neath your
touch,

So all alive, your silence seems unreal.

Can it be true that you who felt so much
Lie there alone and can no longer feel?

O comrade, though maybe they call you dead,
To us who loved you, *that* you cannot be!
God grant when in my turn I too am sped,
Someone may find as much to say of me.

THE COST

TAKE back the honour and the fame,
The victory we've won,
Take all the credit from my name,
If this can be undone—
Let him, my friend that used to be,
Somehow be given back to me.

Don't mock me with the pride of it,
The glory of his death,
I only know he sighed a bit—
I felt him catch his breath.
O God, if miracles can be,
May he be given back to me!

LINES TO A GARRISON CHURCHYARD

A CHURCHYARD by a roadside bend,
Forgotten and unkept,
Bestrewn with gravestones, end to end,
Where stricken hearts have wept.

The scarlet of the gallant dead
Though hid beneath the turf,
Is born again in poppies red
That nod towards the surf.

O little silent waiting place
That looks towards the sea,
Within your crowded little space,
Lies all that's dear to me.

VALETTA.

THE STREET OF "STICK NO BILLS"

(MALTA)

ONE recent afternoon, a fair relation
Misguidedly, but meaning well, had said
She must refuse a pressing invitation,
And would I kindly deputise instead;
And though tea parties aren't quite in my line
I thought it would be boorish to decline.

So much misled by cousinly affection,
I made my visitation (like the plague),
And shortly found my notions of direction
Were somewhat on the verge of being vague.
In fact, to be quite candid I must say
In spite of what she warned, I lost my way.

Through narrow streets I wandered on my visit—
Down little slopes and up distressing hills—
Each time I said "Well, this one surely is it."
But all were called the street of "Stick no Bills,"
A name that seems so silly when you meet it,
One wonders what induced them to repeat it.

I thought these local names seem strange and queer,
Although, of course, I'm insular and foreign,
But all these so-called streets to me appear
As like an overcrowded rabbit-warren;
Some say it is monotony that kills—
At any rate, I nearly died of "Stick no Bills."

Each time my brain would conjure dreams of tea,
I came across this legend on the wall,
And no one seemed to know my host-to-be,
Or cared if I arrived for tea at all;
I didn't—for I ultimately turned
And made a mental note to this effect:

That if, eventually I home returned,
I'd never, never go to tea, except
Somebody took me—or if Heaven wills,
They put up names, instead of "Stick no Bills."

SLIEMA.

LINES TO A MALTESE GOAT

O ANIMAL, that Holy Writ selected
As representing everything that's vile,
Wherein the sheep were finally elected,
And you were put aside as full of guile!
Until I came out here I used to puzzle,
Why goats were so inferior to sheep;
But *now* I've seen the way in which you guzzle,
And heard the bells which rob me of my sleep.
So goat, I think no fate that could befall you
Is more than you deserve; O Quadruped,
I spend the day inventing things to call you,
And wishing you were mutton—frozen dead!

FLORIANA.

“MARSMASCETTO”

LAPPING by the Lazaretto,
Far away in Malta's Isle,
Flows the creek of Marsmascetto,
Languid as a lady's smile.

Swarthy “dghaisa” men are plying,
Lazily with dripping oars,
Little ferry boats are flying,
In between the rocky shores.

Now amidst a world of worries,
Death and I play hide and seek,
But the water never hurries,
Down the Marsmascetto creek.

ON SICK LEAVE

“ You must go home and have an absolutely quiet time.”—*Doctor's Order.*

METHOUGHT I'd find a sylvan spot
Remote from War's alarms,
And undisturbed by shell and shot
Enjoy its rural charms.

But hardly had I settled there
To profit by the change,
Before a rifle rent the air
From some adjacent range.

“ This is too reminiscent far,”
Said I, “ of German sniping,”
And then I got another jar—
The Scottish passed me piping.

And after that a whistle blew
Up somewhere at the back,
And down the hill a cheering crew
Came practising attack.

So send me back to France again,
Dear Doctor, it is best;
That seems the only place to gain
A really quiet rest.

RAILWAY COURTING

1914

IN olden days, the crowd would gaze
At Gwendolen and me,
Whene'er we went on pleasure bent,
Whatever that may be.

What I disbursed to travel first
Would finance half the war,
And if I drew a blind or two,
The crowd looked all the more.

1915

But now at night, it's different quite,
We're married and resigned—
A year too late, guards intimate
You *must* pull down the blind.

THE CHOICE

I'D rather clean a bayonet from the scarlet stain
upon it,
And feel that I was helping as I should,
Than be widely celebrated as the author of a sonnet,
Supposing for an instant that I could.

Might I choose between the making of a sorely-
needed shell,
And painting some great masterpiece of art,
I'd rather work at Woolwich—and I'd try to do it
well.

That seems to be by far the finer part.

For the time has come for doing, and it's better
nowadays
To die unknown, unhonoured, undismayed,
Than to live in selfish comfort; just a man who
hip-hurrays,
The reckoning that other men have paid.

THE SLACKER

BEHOLD him, promenading in the sun,
Resplendently and fearfully arrayed,
A look upon his face of duty done—
No doubt you've seen the Slacker on parade.

The straw just tilted up the slightest bit,
His face suffused with healthy (chemist's) tan,
His walk denoting clearly he is "IT,"
The flappers' friend, the seaside superman.

Those shoes and socks, those patriotic ties,
How long will they enthral us on the front?—
The only front the Slacker ever tries,
If one may be so tactless and so blunt.

To some I know the Slacker's an affliction
Which ought to be dispensed with very soon;
I'd love to murmur in his ear, "Conscription—
God help you if you're put in *my* platoon."

Young men on the train, how can you remain—
Though helpful you've been with the freighting?
It's time to combine—there's only one line
To keep back the Hymners of Hating:
We're counting on you. So couple up, do—
This isn't the time to be waiting.

Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor,
Benedict, bachelor;
Your country's call is "One and all,"
So what are you waiting for?

The brave that have died have always relied
On someone their pluck emulating;
Excuses forget, there's work for you yet,
So why stay at home contemplating?
All classes have read our debt to the dead,
So why not have done with the waiting?









