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THE
YOUNG GUARD
E. W. HORNUNG

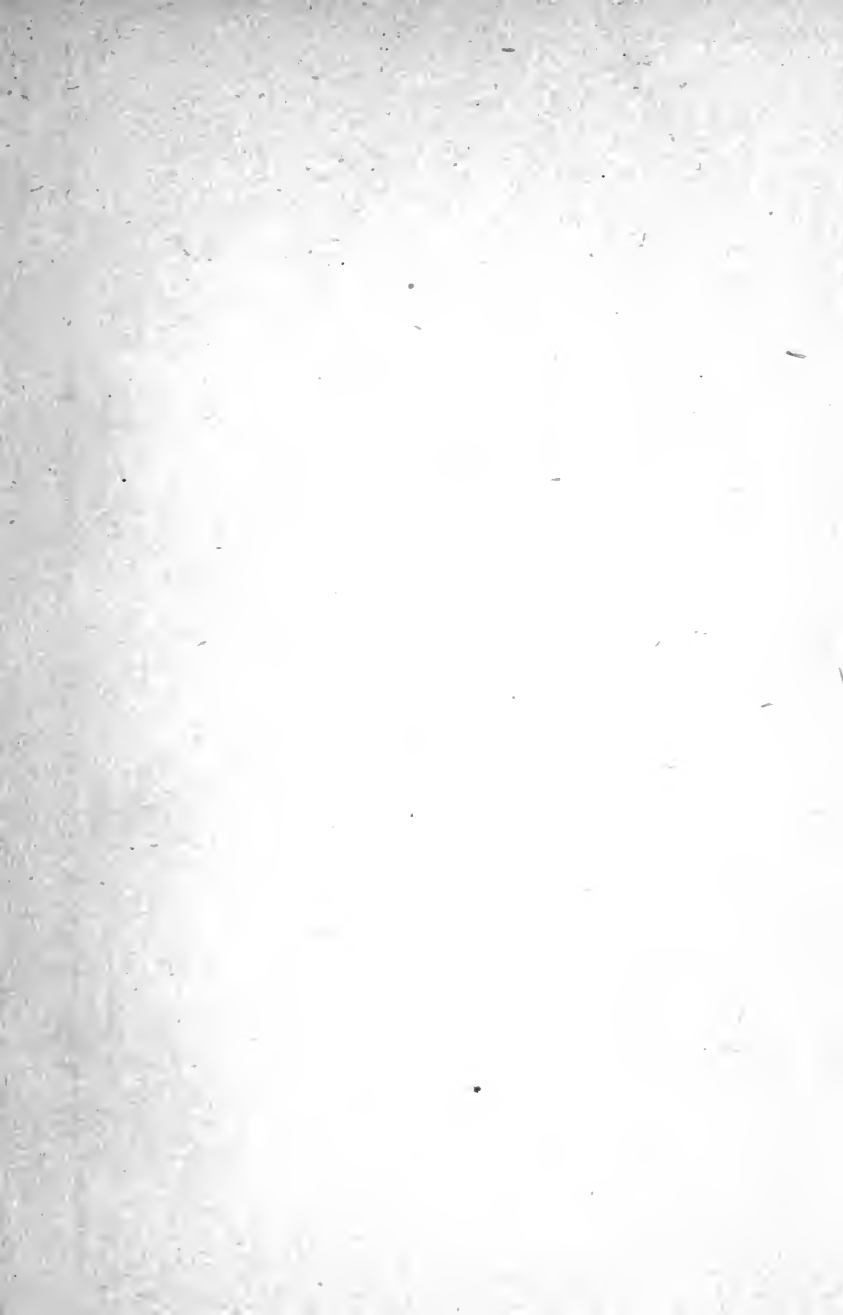
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Author of "Raffles"



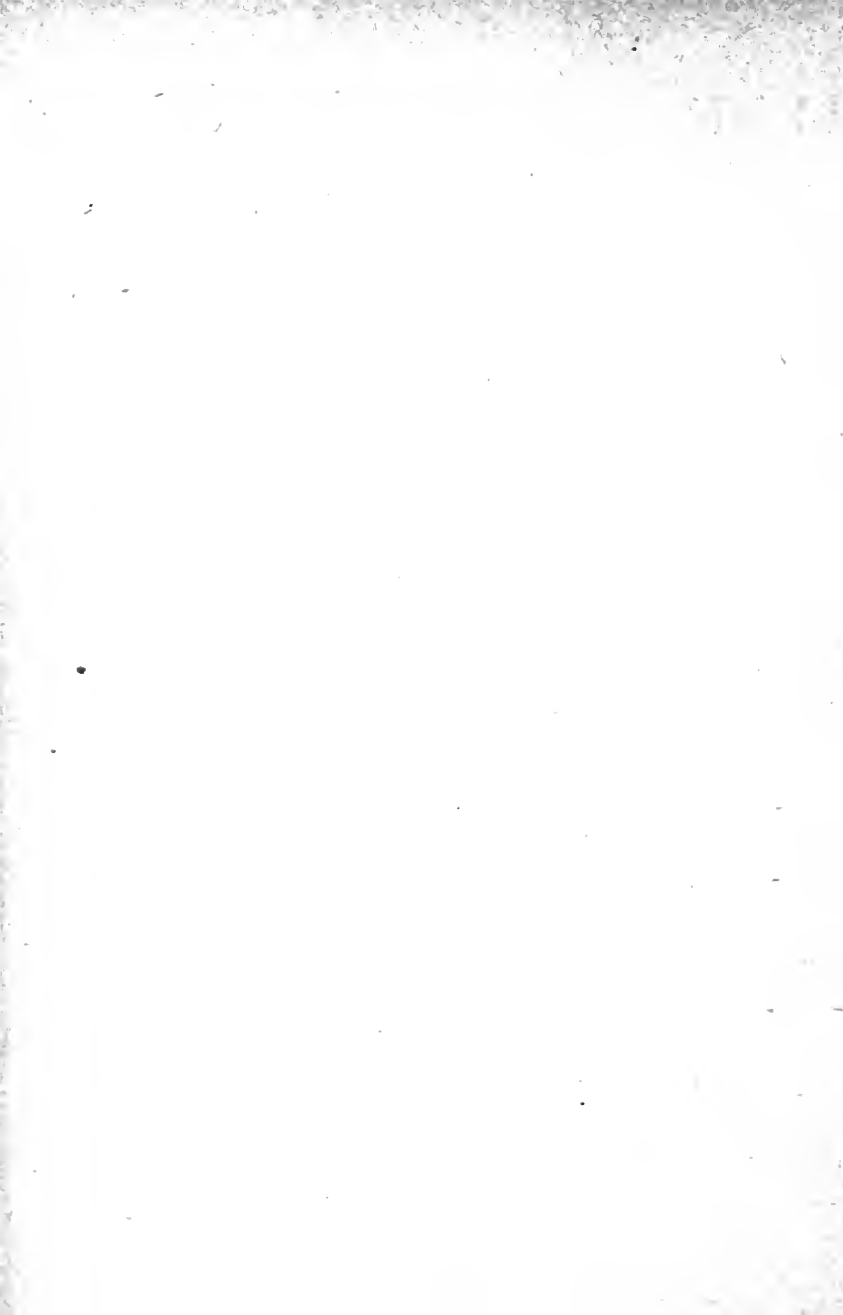
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THE YOUNG GUARD



THE YOUNG GUARD

BY

E. W. HORNUNG

AUTHOR OF

"NOTES OF A CAMP-FOLLOWER ON THE WESTERN FRONT"

LONDON

CONSTABLE AND COMPANY LTD.

1919

*Most of these pieces appeared during the war.
The usual acknowledgements are tendered to The
Spectator in three cases and The Times in
two, as well as to Land and Water, The
Cologne Post and sundry School Magazines.*

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CONSECRATION

*CHILDREN we deemed you all the days
We vexed you with our care :
But in a Universe ablaze,
What was your childish share ?
To rush upon the flames of Hell,
To quench them with your blood !
To be of England's flower that fell
Ere yet it brake the bud !*

*And we who wither where we grew,
And never shed but tears,
As children now would follow you
Through the remaining years ;
Tread in the steps we thought to guide,
As firmly as you trod ;
And keep the name you glorified
Clean before man and God.*

LORD'S LEAVE

(1915)

No Lord's this year : no silken lawn on which
A dignified and dainty throng meanders.
The Schools take guard upon a fierier pitch
Somewhere in Flanders.

Bigger the cricket here ; yet some who tried
In vain to earn a Colour while at Eton
Have found a place upon an England side
That can't be beaten !

A demon bowler's bowling with his head—
His heart's as black as skins in Carolina !
Either he breaks, or shoots almost as dead
As Anne Regina ;

While the deep-field-gun, trained upon your
stumps,
From concrete grand-stand far beyond the
bound'ry,
Lifts up his ugly mouth and fairly pumps
Shells from Krupp's foundry.

But like the time the game is out of joint—
No screen, and too much mud for cricket
lover ;
Both legs go slip, and there's sufficient point
In extra cover !

Cricket? 'Tis Sanscrit to the super-Hun—
Cheap cross between Caligula and Cassius,
To whom speech, prayer, and warfare are all
one—
Equally gaseous !

Playing a game's beyond him and his hordes ;
Theirs but to play the snake or wolf or
vulture :
Better one sporting lesson learnt at Lord's
Than all their Kultur. . . .

Sinks a torpedoed Phœbus from our sight ;
— Over the field of play see darkness stealing ;
Only in this one game, against the light
There's no appealing.

Now for their flares . . . and now at last the
stars . . .
Only the stars now, in their heavenly million,
Glisten and blink for pity on our scars
From the Pavilion.

LAST POST

(1915)

LAST summer, centuries ago,
I watched the postman's lantern glow,
As night by night on leaden feet
He twinkled down our darkened street.

So welcome on his beaten track,
The bent man with the bulging sack !
But dread of every sleepless couch,
A whistling imp with leathern pouch !

And now I meet him in the way,
And earth is Heaven, night is Day,
For oh ! there shines before his lamp
An envelope without a stamp !

Address in pencil ; overhead,
The Censor's triangle in red.
Indoors and up the stair I bound :
"One from the boy, still safe, still sound !

“ Still merry in a dubious trench
They've taken over from the French ;
Still making light of duty done ;
Still full of Tommy, Fritz, and fun !

“ Still finding War of games the cream,
And his platoon a priceless team—
Still running it by sportsman's rule,
Just as he ran his house at school.

“ Still wild about the ' bombing stunt '
He makes his hobby at the front.
Still trustful of his wondrous luck—
' Prepared to take on old man Kluck ! ' ”

Awed only in the peaceful spells,
And only scornful of their shells,
His beaming eye yet found delight
In ruins lit by flares at night,

In clover field and hedgerow green,
Apart from cover or a screen,
In Nature spurting spick-and-span
For all the devilries of Man.

He said those weeks of blood and tears
Were worth his score of radiant years.
He said he had not lived before—
Our boy who never dreamt of War !

He gave us of his own dear glow,
Last summer, centuries ago.
Bronzed leaves still cling to every bough.
I don't waylay the postman now.

Doubtless upon his nightly beat
He still comes twinkling down our street.
I am not there with straining eye—
A whistling imp could tell you why.

THE OLD BOYS

(1917)

“ WHO is the one with the empty sleeve ? ”

“ Some sport who was in the swim.”

“ And the one with the ribbon who’s home on
leave ? ”

“ Good Lord ! I remember *him* !

A hulking fool, low down in the school,

And no good at games was he—

All fingers and thumbs—and very few chums.

(I wish he’d shake hands with me !) ”

“ Who is the one with the heavy stick,

Who seems to walk from the shoulder ? ”

“ Why, many’s the goal you have watched him
kick ! ”

“ He’s looking a lifetime older.

Who is the one that’s so full of fun—

I never beheld a blither—

Yet his eyes are fixt as the furrow betwixt ? ”

“ He cannot see out of either.”

“ Who are the ones that *we* cannot see,
 Though we feel them as near as near ?
In Chapel one felt them bend the knee,
 At the match one felt them cheer.
In the deep still shade of the Colonnade,
 In the ringing quad’s full light,
They are laughing here, they are chaffing there,
 Yet never in sound or sight.”

“ Oh, those are the ones who never shall leave,
 As they once were afraid they would !
They marched away from the school at eve,
 But at dawn came back for good,
With deathless blooms from uncoffin’d tombs
 To lay at our Founder’s shrine.
As many are they as ourselves to-day,
 And their place is yours and mine.”

“ But who are the ones they can help or harm ? ”
 “ Each small boy, never so new,
Has an Elder Brother to take his arm,
 And show him the thing to do—
And the thing to resist with a doubled fist,
 If he’d be nor knave nor fool—
And the Game to play if he’d tread the way
 Of the School behind the school.”

RUDDY YOUNG GINGER

(1915)

RUDDY young Ginger was somewhere in camp,
War broke it up in a day,
Packing cadets of the steadier stamp
Home with the smallest delay.
Ginger braves town in his O.T.C. rags—
Beards a Staff Marquis—the limb!
Saying, “Your son, Sir, is one of my fags,”
Gets a Commission through him.
Then to his tailor’s for khaki *complet* ;
Then to Pall Mall for a sword ;
Lastly, a wire to his people to say,
“Left school—joined the Line—are you
bored?”

And it *was* a bit cool
(A term’s fees in the pool
By a rule of the school).
There were those who said “Fool!”
Of young Ginger.

Ruddy young Ginger! Who gave him that name?
Tommys who had his own nerve!
"Into 'im, Ginger!" was heard in a game
With a neighbouring Special Reserve.
Blushing and grinning and looking fifteen,
Ginger, with howitzer punt,
Bags his man's wind as succinctly and clean
As he hopes to bag Huns at the front.
Death on recruits who fall out by the way,
Sentries who yawn at their post,
Yet he sang such a song at the Y.M.C.A.
That the C.O. turned green as a ghost!

Less the song than the stance,
And the dissolute dance,
Drew a glance so askance
That . . . they packed him to France,
Little Ginger.

Next month, to the haunts of fine Ladies and
Lords
I ventured, in Grosvenor Square:
The stateliest chambers were hospital wards—
And ruddy young Ginger was there.
In spite of his hurts he looked never so red,
Nor ever less shy or sedate,
Though his hair had been cropped (by machine-
gun, he said)
And bandages turbaned his pate.

He was mostly in holes—but his cheek was intact!

I could not but notice, with joy,
The loveliest Sisters had most to transact
With ruddy young Ginger—some boy!

Slaying Huns by the tons,
With a smile like a nun's—
Oh! of all the brave ones,
All the sons of our guns—
Give me Ginger!

THE BALLAD OF ENSIGN JOY

(1917)

*Solomon cited wonders three ;
One was the way of a ship at sea,
One was the way of a mighty bird,
And the way of a serpent was the third.
But Solomon (since he was in the trade)
Appended the way of a man with a maid :
And Solomon (still in the flesh) might add
The way of a maid with a soldier lad.*

THIS is the story of Ensign Joy
 (And the obsolete rank withal
That I love for each gentle English boy
 Who jumped to his country's call.
By their fire and fun, and the deeds they've done,
I would gazette them Second to none
 Who faces a gun in Gaul !)

It is also the story of Ermyntude
 (A less appropriate name
For an idealistic Academy prude ;
 But under it, all the same,

The usual consanguineous squad
Had made her an honest child of God,
And cannot be held to blame).

It was just when the grind of the Special Reserves,
Employed upon Coast Defence,
Was getting on every Ensign's nerves—
Sick-keen to be drafted hence—
That they met and played tennis and danced and
sang,
The lad with the laugh and the schoolboy slang,
The girl with the eyes intense.

Yet it wasn't for him that she languished and
sighed,
But for all of our dear doomed youth ;
And it wasn't for her, but her sex, that he cried,
If he could but have probed the truth.
Did she? She would none of his hot young
heart ;
As khaki escort he's tall and smart,
As lover a shade uncouth.

He went with his draft. She returned to her
craft.
He wrote in his merry vein ;
She read him aloud, and the Studio laughed !
(Ermytrude bore the strain.)

He was full of gay bloodshed and Old Man Fritz :
His flippancy sent her friends into fits.
(Ermyntrude frowned with pain.)

His tales of the Sergeant who swore so hard
Left Ermyntrude cold and prim ;
The tactless truth of the picture jarred,
And some of his jokes were grim.
Yet, let him but skate upon tender ice,
And he had to write to her twice or thrice
Before she would answer him.

(Yet once she sent him a fairy's box,
And her pocket felt the brunt
Of tinned contraptions and books and socks—
Which he hailed as "a sporting stunt!"
She slaved at his muffler none the less,
And still took pleasure in murmuring, "Yes—
For a friend of mine at the Front.")

One fine morning his name appears—
Looking so pretty in print !
"Wounded !" she warbles in tragedy tears—
And pictures the reddening lint,
The drawn damp face and the draggled hair . . .
But she found him blooming in Belgrave Square,
With a punctured shin in a splint.

It wasn't a haunt of Ermytrude's,
 That grandiose urban pile ;
 Like starlight in arctic altitudes
 Was the stately Sister's smile.
 Tropical sunshine was Ensign Joy—
 In his golden greeting no least alloy—
 In his beaming eyes no guile.

He showed her the bullet that did the trick—
 He showed her the trick, X-ray'd ;
 He showed her a table timed to a tick,
 And a map that an airman made.
 He spoke of a shell that caused grievous loss—
 But he never mentioned a certain Cross
 For his part in the camisade.

She saw it herself in a list next day,
 And it brought her back to his bed
 With a number of beautiful things to say,
 Which were mostly over his head.
 Turned pink as his own pyjamas' stripe,
 To her mind he ceased to embody a type—
 Sank into her heart instead.

“ I wonder that all of you didn't retire ! ”
 “ My blighters were not that kind.”
 “ But it says *you*—‘ advanced under murderous
 fire,
 Machine-gun and shell combined ’—”

“Oh, that’s the regular War Office wheeze!”
“‘Advanced’—with that leg!—‘on his hands and
knees’!”

“I couldn’t leave it behind.”

He was soon trick-driving an invalid chair,
And dancing about on a crutch.
The *haute noblesse* still in Belgrave Square
Were moved to oblige as such.
They sent him for many a motor-whirl—
With the wistful, willowy, wisp of a girl
Who never again lost touch.

Their people were most of them dead and gone,
They had only themselves to please.
His pay was enough to marry upon,
As every Ensign sees.
They would muddle along as others did,
On vast supplies of the *tertium quid*
One brackets with bread and cheese.

They gave him some leave after Belgrave
Square—
And bang went a month on banns;
For Ermyntrude had a natural *flair*
For the least unusual plans.
Her heaviest uncle came down well,
And entertained, at a fair hotel,
The dregs of the coupled clans.

A certain number of cheques accrued
 To keep the wolf from the door :
 The economical Ermyntrude
 Had charge of the dwindling store,
 When a Board reported her bridegroom fit
 As—some expression she didn't permit . . .
 And he left for the Front once more.

His crowd had been climbing the jaws of hell :
 He found them in death's dog-teeth,
 With little to show but a deal to tell
 In their fissure of smoking heath.
 There were changes—of course—but the change
 in him
 Was the ribbon that showed on his tunic trim
 And the tumult hidden beneath !

For all he had suffered and seen before
 Seemed nought to a husband's care ;
 And the Chinese puzzle of modern war
 For subtlety couldn't compare
 With the delicate springs of the complex life
 To be led with a highly sensitised wife
 In a slightly rarefied air !

Yet it's good to be back with the old platoon—
 And some of the same old men ;
 Each cheery dog is a henchman boon—
 Especially Sergeant Wren !

Ermytrude couldn't endure his name—
Considered bad language no claim to fame,
Yet it's good to—hear it again!

(Better to feel the Sergeant's grip,
Though your fingers ache to the bone!
Better to take the Sergeant's tip
Than to make up your mind alone.
They can do things together, can Wren and
Joy—
The bristly bear and the beardless boy—
That neither could do on his own.)

But there's never a word about Old Man Wren
In the screeds he scribbles to-day—
Though he praises his N.C.O.'s and men
In rather a pointed way.
And he rubs it in (with a knitted brow)
That the war's as good as a picnic now,
And better than any play!

His booby-hutch is "as safe as the Throne,"
And he fares "like the C.-in-Chief."
He has "treated his chaps to a gramophone
By way of comic relief."
(And he sighs as he hears the chaps applaud,
While the Woodbine spices are wafted abroad
With a savour of bully-beef.)

He may touch on the latest type of bomb,
 But Ermyntrude needn't blench,
 For he never says where you hurl it from,
 And it might be from your trench.
 He never might lead a stealthy band,
 Or toe the horrors of No Man's Land,
 Or swim at the sickly stench. . . .

Her letters came up by ration-cart
 As the men stood-to before dawn :
 He followed the chart of her soaring heart
 With face transfigured yet drawn :
 It filled him with pride, touched with chivalrous
 shame
 But—it spoilt the war, as a first-class game,
 For this particular pawn.

(The Sergeant sees it, and damns the cause
 In a duly sulphurous flow ;
 But turns and trounces, without a pause,
 A junior N.C.O.
 For the crime of agreeing that Ensign Joy
 Isn't altogether the officer boy
 That he was four months ago !)

At length he's dumfounded (the month being
 May)
 By a sample of Ermyntrude's fun :

“ You will kindly get leave *over Christmas Day,*
Or make haste and finish the Hun ! ”

But Christmas means presents, she bids him
beware :

“ So what do you say to a son and heir ?
I'm thinking of giving you one ! ! ! ”

What, indeed, does the Ensign say ?

What does he sit and write ?

What do his heart-strings drone all day,

What do they throb all night ?

What does he add to his piteous prayers :

“ Not for my own sake, Lord, but—*theirs,*
See me safe through. . . . ”

“ They talk ”—and he writhes—“ of our spirit
out here,

Our valour and all the rest !

There's my poor, lonely, delicate dear,

As brave as the very best !

We stand or fall in a cheery crowd,

And yet how often we grouse aloud !

She faces *that* with a jest ! ”

He has had no sleep for a day and a night ;

He has written her half a ream ;

He has lain him down to wait for the light,

And at last come sleep—and a dream.

He's hopping on sticks up the studio stair :
 A telegraph-boy is waiting there,
 And—that is his darling's scream !

He picks her up in a tender storm—
 But how does it come to pass
 That he cannot see his reflected form
 With hers in the studio glass ?
 "What's gone wrong with that mirror?" he cries.
 But only the Sergeant's voice replies :
 "Wake up, Sir! The Gas—the Gas!"

Is it a part of the dream of dread ?
 What are the men about ?
 Each one sticking a haunted head
 Into a spectral clout !
 Funny, the dearth of gibe and joke,
 When each one looks like a pig in a poke,
 Not omitting the snout !

"Here's your mask, Sir! No time to lose!"
 Ugh, what a gallows shape !
 Partly white cap, and partly noose !
 Somebody ties the tape.
 Goggles of sorts, it seems, inset :
 Cock them over the parapet,
 Study the battlescape.

Ensign Joy's in the second line—
And more than a bit cut off ;
A furlong or so down a green incline
The fire-trench curls in the trough.
Joy cannot see it—it's in the bed
Of a river of poison that brims instead.
He can only hear—a cough !

Nothing to do for the companies there—
Nothing but waiting now,
While the Gas rolls up on the balmy air,
And a small bird cheeps on a bough.
All of a sudden the sky seems full
Of trusses of lighted cotton-wool
And the enemy's big bow-wow !

The firmament cracks with his airy mines,
And an interlacing hail
Threshes the clover between our lines,
As a vile invisible flail.
And the trench has become a mighty vice
That holds us, in skins of molten ice,
For the vapours that fringe the veil.

It's coming—in billowy swirls—as smoke
From the roof a world on fire.
It—comes ! And a lad with a heart of oak
Knows only that heart's desire !

His masked lips whimper but one dear name—
And so is he lost to inward shame

That he thrills at the shout : "*Re-tire !*"

Whose is the order, thrice renewed ?

Ensign Joy cannot tell :

Only, that way lies Ermyntrude,

And the other way this hell !

Three men leap from the poisoned fosse,

Three men plunge from the parados,

And—their—officer—as well !

Now, as he flies at their flying heels,

He awakes to his deep disgrace,

And the yawning pit of his shame reveals

A way of saving his face :

He twirls his stick to a shepherd's crook,

To trip and bring one of them back to book,

As though he'd been giving chase !

He got back gasping—" They'd too much start ! "

" I'd've shot 'em at sight ! " said Wren.

" That was your job, Sir, if you'd the 'eart—

But it wouldn't've been you, then.

I pray my Lord I may live to see

A firing-party in front o' them three ! "

(That's what he said to the men.)

Now, Joy and Wren, of Company B,
 Are a favourite firm of mine ;
 And the way they reinforced A, C, and D
 Was perhaps not exactly fine,
 But it meant a good deal both to Wren and Joy—
 That grim, gaunt man, but that desperate boy !—
 And it didn't weaken the Line.

“Not a bad effort of yours, my lad,”

The Major deigned to declare.

“My Sergeant's plan, Sir”—

“And *that's* not bad—

But you've lost that ribbon you wear ?”

“It—must have been—eaten away by the Gas !”

“Well—ribbons are ribbons—but don't be an ass !

It's better to do than dare.”

Dare ! He has dared to desert his post—

But he daren't acknowledge his sin !

He has dared to face Wren with a lying boast—

But Wren is not taken in.

None sings his praises so long and loud—

With look so loving and loyal and proud !

But the boy sees under his skin.

Daily and gaily he wrote to his wife,

Who had dropped the beatified droll

And was writing to him on the marvel of Life,

Which illumed and exalted her soul.

Her courage was high, though she mentioned its
height :

But he saw not a joint in her Armour of Light,
Nor the bee in her Aureole.

And never a helm had the lad we know

As he stole on his nightly raids,

With a brace of his Blighters, an N.C.O.

And a bagful of hand-grenades.

But the way that he rattled and harried the Hun—

The deeds he did dare, and the risks he would
run—

Were the gossip of two Brigades :

How he'd stand stock-still as the trunk of a tree,

With his face tucked down out of sight,

When a star-shell burst and the other three

Fell prone in the frightening light ;

How the German sandbags, that made them
quake,

Were the only cover he cared to take,

But he'd eavesdrop there all night. . . .

Machine-guns, tapping a phrase in Morse,

Grew hot on a random quest,

And swarms of bullets buzzed down the course

Like wasps from a trampled nest.

Yet, that last night . . . They had just set off,
When he pitched on his face with a smothered
cough
And a row of holes in his chest.

He left a letter. It saved the lives
Of the three who ran from the Gas;
A small enclosure alone survives,
In Battersea, under glass :
Only the ribbon he tore from his breast
On the day he turned and ran with the rest,
And lied with a lip of brass !

But the letters they wrote about the boy,
From the Brigadier to the men !
They would "never forget dear Mr. Joy,"
Nor look on his like again.
Ermyntrude read them with dry, proud eye.
There was only one letter that made her cry.
It was from Sergeant Wren :

"There never was such a fearless man,
Or one so beloved as he.
He was always up to some daring plan,
Or some treat for his men and me.
There wasn't his match when he went away ;
But since he got back, there has not been a day
But what he has earned a V.C." . . .

A cynical story? That's not my view.
 The years since he fell are twain.
 What were his chances of coming through?
 Which of his friends remain?
 But Ermyntrude's training a splendid boy
 Twenty years younger than Ensign Joy.
 On balance, a British gain!

And Ermyntrude, did she lose her all,
 Or find it, two years ago?
 O young girl-wives of the boys who fall,
 With your youth and your babes to show!
 No heart but bleeds for your widowhood:
 Yet Life is with you, and Life is good:
 No bone of *your* bone lies low!

Your blessedness came—as it went—in a day.
 Deep dread but heightened your mirth.
 Your idols' feet never turned to clay—
 Never lit upon common earth.
 Love is the Game but is not the Goal:
 You played it together, body and soul,
 And you had your Candle's worth.

Yes! though the Candle light a Shrine,
 And heart cannot count the cost,
 You are Winners yet in its holy shine!—
 Would *they* choose to have lived and lost?

There are chills, you see, for the finest hearts ;
But, once it is only old Death that parts,
There can never come twinge of frost.

And this be our comfort for Everyboy
Cut down in his high heyday,
Or ever the Sweets of the Morning cloy,
Or the swift foot falter or stray.
So a sunlit billow curls to a crest,
And shouts as it breaks at its loveliest,
In a glory of rainbow spray !

BOND AND FREE

(THE BAPAUME ROAD, *March 1917*)

MISTY and pale the sunlight, brittle and black the
trees ;

Roads powdered like sticks of candy for a car to
crunch as they freeze . . .

Then we overtook a Battalion . . . and it wasn't
a roadway then,

But cymbals and drums and dulcimers to the
beat of the marching men !

They were laden and groomed for the trenches,
they were shaven and scrubbed and fed ;

Like the scales of a single Saurian their helmets
rippled ahead ;

Not a sorrowful face beneath them, just the tail
of a scornful eye

For the car full of favoured mufti that went
quacking and quaking by.

You gloat and take note in your motoring coat,
and the sights come fast and thick :

A party of pampered prisoners, toying with shovel
and pick ;

A town where some of the houses are so many
 heaps of stone,
And some of them steel anatomies picked clean
 to the buckled bone.

A road like a pier in a hurricane of mountainous
 seas of mud,
Where a few trees, whittled to walking-sticks, rose
 out of the frozen flood
Like the masts of the sunken villages that might
 have been down below—
Or blown off the festering face of an earth that
 God Himself wouldn't know!

Not a yard but was part of a shell-hole—not an
 inch, to be more precise—
And most of the holes held water, and all the
 water was ice:
They stared at the bleak blue heavens like the
 glazed blue eyes of the slain,
Till the snow came, shutting them gently, and
 sheeting the slaughtered plain.

Here a pile of derelict rifles, there a couple of
 horses lay—
Like rockerless rocking-horses, as wooden of leg
 as they,

And not much redder of nostril—not anything
like so grim
As the slinking ghoul of a lean live cat creeping
over the crater's rim !

And behind and beyond and about us were the
long black Dogs of War,
With pigmies pulling their tails for them, and
making the monsters roar
As they slithered back on their haunches, as they
put out their flaming tongues,
And spat a murderous message long leagues from
their iron lungs !

They were kennelled in every corner, and some
were in gay disguise,
But all kept twitching their muzzles and baying
the silvery skies !
A howitzer like a hyena guffawed point-blank at
the car—
But only the sixty - pounder leaves an absolute
aural scar !

(Could a giant but crack a cable as a stockman
cracks his whip,
Or tear up a mile of calico with one unthinkable
r-r-r-rip !

Could he only squeak a slate-pencil about the
size of this gun,
You might get some faint idea of its sound, which
is those three sounds in one.)

But certain noises were absent, we looked for
some sights in vain,
And I cannot tell you if shrapnel does really
descend like rain—
Or Big Stuff burst like a bonfire, or bullets
whistle or moan ;
But the other figures I'll swear to—if some of
'em *are* my own !

.
Livid and moist the twilight, heavy with snow
the trees,
And a road as of pleated velvet the colour of new
cream-cheese . . .
Then we overtook a Battalion . . . and I'm
hunting still for the word
For that gaunt, undaunted, haunted, whitening,
frightening herd !

They had done their tour of the trenches, they
were coated and caked with mud,
And some of them wore a bandage, and some of
them wore their blood !

The gaps in their ranks were many, and none of them looked at me . . .

And I thought of no more vain phrases for the things I was there to see,

But I felt like a man in a prison van where the rest of the world goes Free.

SHELL-SHOCK IN ARRAS

(1918)

ALL night they crooned high overhead
As the skies are over men :
I lay and smiled in my cellar bed,
And went to sleep again.

All day they whistled like a lash
That cracked in the trembling town :
I stood and listened for the crash
Of houses thundering down.

In, in they came, three nights and days,
All night and all day long ;
It made us learned in their ways
And experts on their song.

Like a noisy clock, or a steamer's screw,
Their beat debauched the ear,
And left it dead to a deafening few
That burst who cared how near ?

We only laughed when the flimsy floor
Heaved on the shuddering sod :
But when some idiot slammed a door—
My God !

THE BIG THING

(1918)

IT was a British Linesman. His face was like a
fist,

His sleeve all stripes and chevrons from the
elbow to the wrist.

Said he to an American (with other words of his):
"It's a big thing you are doing—do you know
how big it is?"

"I guess, Sir," that American inevitably drawled,
"Big Bill's our proposition an' we're goin' for him
bald.

You guys may have him rattled, but I figure it's
for us

To slaughter, quarter, grill or bile, an' masticate
the cuss."

"I hope your teeth," the Linesman said, "are
equal to your tongue—

But that's the sort of carrion that's better when
it's hung.

Yet—the big thing you're doing I should like to
make you see !”

“ Our stunt,” said that young Yankee, “ is to set
the whole world free !”

The Linesman used a venial verb (and other parts
of speech) :

“ That's just the way the papers talk and
politicians preach !

But apart from gastronomical designs upon the
Hun—

And the rather taller order—there's a big thing
that you've *done*.”

“ Why, say ! The biggest thing on earth, to any
cute onlooker,

Is Old Man Bull and Uncle Sam aboard the
same blamed hooker !

One crew, one port, one speed ahead, steel-true
twin-hearts within her :

One ding-dong English-singin' race—a race
without a winner !”

The boy's a boyish mixture—half high-brow and
half droll :

So brave and naïve and cock-a-hoop—so sure
yet pure of soul !

Behold him bright and beaming as the bride-
groom after church—

The Linesman looking wistful as a rival in the
lurch!

“I'd love to be as young as you—” he doesn't
even swear—

“Love to be joining up anew and spoiling for my
share!

But when your blood runs cold and old, and brain
and bowels squirm,

The only thing to ease you is some fresh blood in
the firm.

“When the war was young, and *we* were young,
we felt the same as you:

A few short months of glory—and we didn't care
how few!

French, British and Dominions, it took us all the
same—

Who knows but what the Hun himself enjoyed
his dirty game!

“We tumbled out of tradesmen's carts, we fell off
office stools;

Fathers forsook their families, boys ran away from
schools;

Mothers untied their apron-strings, lovers unloosed their arms—

All Europe was a wedding and the bells were war's alarms!

“The chime had changed—You took a pull—the old wild peal rings on

With the clamour and the glamour of a Generation gone.

Their fun—their fire—their hearts' desire—are born again in You!”

“*That* the big thing we're doin'?”

“It's as big as Man can do!”

FORERUNNERS¹

(1900)

WHEN I lie dying in my bed,
A grief to wife, and child, and friend,—
How I shall grudge you gallant dead
Your sudden, swift, heroic end !

Dear hands will minister to me,
Dear eyes deplore each shallower breath :
You had your battle-cries, you three,
To cheer and charm you to your death.

You did not wane from worse to worst,
Under coarse drug or futile knife,
But in one grand mad moment burst
From glorious life to glorious Life. . . .

These twenty years ago and more,
'Mid purple heather and brown crag,
Our whole school numbered scarce a score,
And three have fallen for the Flag.

¹ H. P. P.—F. M.—J. W. A. C. St. Ninian's, Moffat, 1879-1880 ; South Africa, 1899-1900.

You two have finished on one side,
 You who were friend and foe at play ;
Together you have done and died ;
 But that was where you learnt the way.

And the third face ! I see it now,
 So delicate and pale and brave.
The clear grey eye, the unruffled brow,
 Were ripening for a soldier's grave.

Ah ! gallant three, too young to die !
 The pity of it all endures.
Yet, in my own poor passing, I
 Shall lie and long for such as yours.

UPPINGHAM SONG

(1913)

AGES ago (as to-day they are reckoned)

I was a lone little, blown little fag :

Panting to heel when Authority beckoned,

Spoiling to write for the *Uppingham Mag.*!

Thirty years on seemed a terrible time then—

Thirty years back seems a twelvemonth or so.

Little I saw myself spinning this rhyme then—

Less do I feel that it's ages ago!

Ages ago that was Somebody's study ;

Somebody Else had the study next door.

O their long walks in the fields dry or muddy!

O their long talks in the evenings of yore!

Still, when they meet, the old evergreen fellows

Jaw in the jolly old jargon as though

Both were as slender and sound in the bellows

As they were ages and ages ago!

O but the ghosts at each turn I could show
you!—

Ghosts in low collars and little cloth caps—
Each of 'em now quite an elderly O.U.—

Wiser, no doubt, and as pleasant—perhaps!
That's where poor Jack lit the slide up with
tollies,

Once when the quad was a foot deep in snow—
When a live Bishop was one of the Pollies¹—
Ages and ages and ages ago!

Things that were Decent and things that were
Rotten,

How I remember them year after year!
Some—it may be—that were better forgotten:
Some that—it may be—should still draw a
tear . . .

More, many more, that are good to remember:
Yarns that grow richer, the older they grow:
Deeds that would make a man's ultimate ember
Glow with the fervour of ages ago!

Did we play footer in funny long flannels?
Had we no Corps to give zest to our drill?
Never a Gym lined throughout with pine panels?
Half of your best buildings were quarry-stone
still?

¹ = Præpostors.

Ah! but it's not for their looks that you love
them,

Not for the craft of the builder below,
But for the spirit behind and above them—
But for the Spirit of Ages Ago!

Eton may rest on her Field and her River.

Harrow has songs that she knows how to sing.
Winchester slang makes the sensitive shiver.

Rugby had Arnold, but never had Thring!
Repton can put up as good an Eleven.

Marlborough men are the fear of the foe.
All that I wish to remark is—thank Heaven
I was at Uppingham ages ago!

WOODEN CROSSES

(1917)

“Go live the wide world over—but when you
come to die,

A quiet English churchyard is the only place to
lie!”—

I held it half a lifetime, until through war's
mischance

I saw the wooden crosses that fret the fields of
France.

A thrush sings in an oak-tree, and from the old
square tower

A chime as sweet and mellow salutes the idle hour:
Stone crosses take no notice — but the little
wooden ones

Are thrilling every minute to the music of the guns!

Upstanding at attention they face the cannonade,
In apple-pie alinement like Guardsmen on parade:
But Tombstones are Civilians who loll or sprawl
or sway

At every crazy angle and stage of slow decay.

For them the Broken Column—in its plot of
unkempt grass ;
The tawdry tinsel garland safeguarded under
glass ;
And the Squire's emblazoned virtues, that would
overweight a Saint,
On the vault empaled in iron—scaling red for
want of paint !

The men who die for England don't need it
rubbing in ;
An automatic stamper and a narrow strip of tin
Record their date and regiment, their number and
their name—
And the Squire who dies for England is treated
just the same.

So stand the still battalions : alert, austere, serene ;
Each with his just allowance of brown earth shot
with green ;
None better than his neighbour in pomp or
circumstance—
All beads upon the rosary that turned the fate of
France !

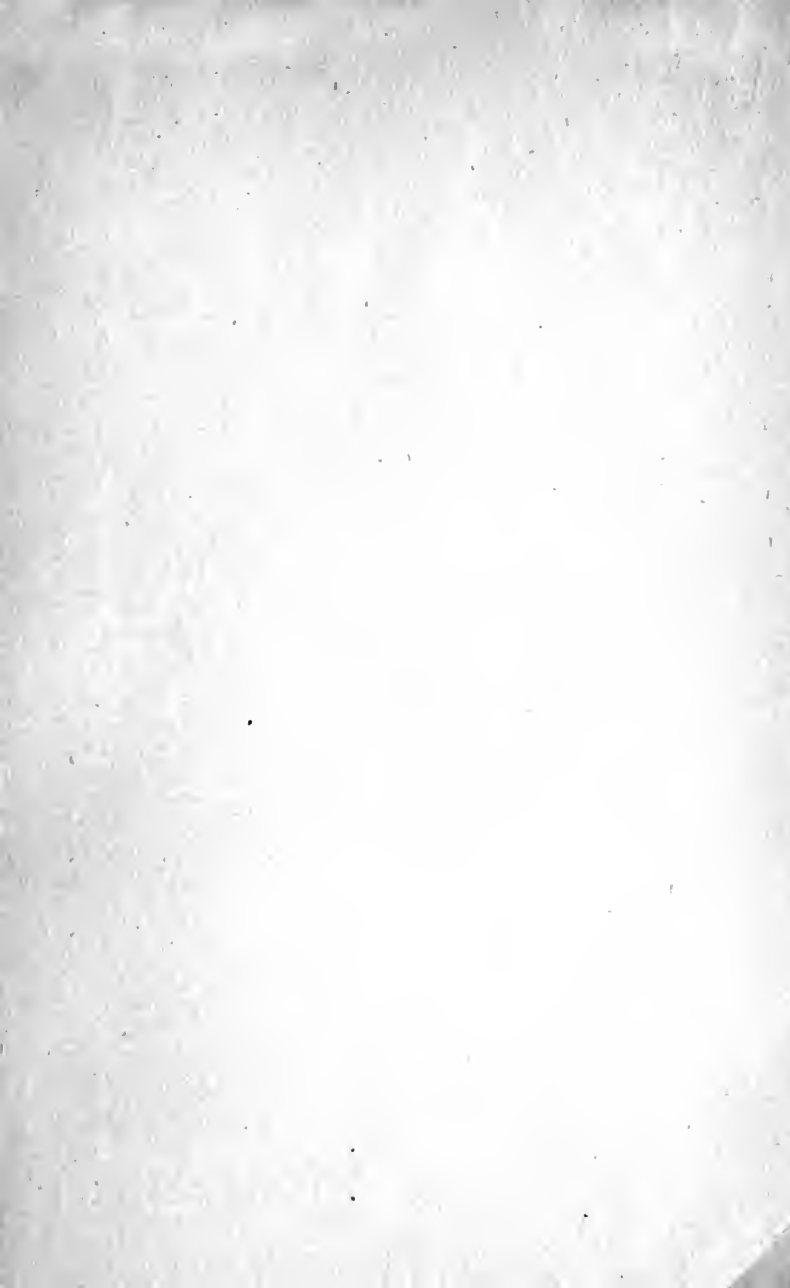
Who says their war is over? While others carry
on,
The little wooden crosses spell but the dead and
gone?

Not while they deck a sky-line, not while they
crown a view,
Or a living soldier sees them and sets his teeth
anew !

The tenants of the churchyard where the singing
thrushes build
Were not, perhaps, all paragons of promise well
fulfilled :
Some failed—through Love, or Liquor—while the
parish looked askance.
But—you cannot *die* a Failure if you win a Cross
in France !

The brightest gems of Valour in the Army's
diadem
Are the V.C. and the D.S.O., M.C. and D.C.M.
But those who live to wear them will tell you
they are dross
Beside the Final Honour of a simple Wooden
Cross.





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