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Hornung**

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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE YOUNG GUARD \*\*\*

**THE YOUNG GUARD**

**By E. W. Hornung**

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# THE YOUNG GUARD

BY

E. W. HORNUNG

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

LONDON

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*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

**C**HILDREN 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 matt and God.

---

## LORD'S LEAVE

(1915)

**N**O 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 Phoebus 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)

**L**AST 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)

**W**HO 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)

**R**UDDY 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?  
Tommies 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

**I**T 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!)

**I**T is also the story of Ermyntrude  
A less appropriate name  
For the dearest prig and the  
prettiest prude!  
But under it, all the same,  
The usual consanguineous squad  
Had made her an honest child  
of God—  
And left her to play the game.

**I**T 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.

**Y**ET it wasn't for him that she  
languished and sighed,  
But for all of our dear deemed  
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.

**H**E went with his draft. She  
returned to her craft.  
He wrote in his merry vein:  
She read him aloud, and the  
Studio laughed!  
Ermyntrude bore the strain.  
He was full of gay bloodshed and  
Old Man Fritz:  
His flippancy sent her friends  
into fits.  
Ermyntrude frowned with  
pain.

**H**IS 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.

**Y**ET 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 mur-  
muring, "Yes!  
For a friend of mine at the  
Front.")

**O**NE 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  
Grosvenor Square,  
With a punctured shin in a  
splint.

**I**T wasn't a haunt of Ermy-  
trude's,  
That grandiose urban pile;  
Like starlight in arctic altitudes  
Was the stately Sister's smile.  
It was just the reverse with  
Ensign Joy—  
In his golden greeting no least  
alloy—  
In his shining eyes no guile!

**H**E 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 escapade!

S HE 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 em-  
body 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 un-  
der murderous fire,  
Machine-gun and shell com-  
bined—"  
"Oh, that's the regular War  
Office wheeze!"  
"'Advanced'—with that leg!—  
'on his hands and knees!'"  
"I couldn't leave it behind."

H E was soon trick-driving an  
invalid chair,  
and dancing about on a crutch;  
The *haute noblesse* of Grosvenor  
Square  
Felt bound 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.

T HEIR people were most of  
them dead and gone.  
They had only themselves to  
His pay was enough to marry  
upon,  
As every Ensign sees.  
They would muddle along (as  
in fact they did)  
With vast supplies of the *tertium*  
quid  
You bracket with bread-and-  
cheese.  
please.

T HEY gave him some leave  
after Grosvenor Square—  
And bang went a month on

banns;  
For Ermytrude 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 Ermytrude  
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.

**H**IS crowd had been climbing  
the jaws of hell:  
He found them in death's dog-  
teeth,  
With little to show but a good  
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 be-  
neath!

**F**OR all he had suffered and  
seen before  
Seemed nought to a husband's  
care;  
And the Chinese puzzle of mod-  
ern 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!

**Y**ET it's good to be back with  
the old platoon—  
"A man in a world of men!"  
Each cheery dog is a henchman  
boon—  
Especially Sergeant Wren!  
Ermytrude couldn't endure his

name—  
Considered bad language no lien  
on fame,  
Yet it's good to—hear it  
again!

**B**ETTER to feel the Ser-  
geant'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 beard-  
less boy—  
That neither could do on his  
own.

**B**UT 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 pic-  
nic now,  
And better than any play!

**H**IS booby-hutch is "as safe  
as the Throne,"  
And he fares "like the C.-in-  
Chief,"  
But has purchased "a top-hole  
gramophone  
By way of comic relief."  
(And he sighs as he hears the  
men applaud,  
While the Woodbine spices are  
wafted abroad  
With the odour of bully-beef.)

**H**E may touch on the latest  
type of bomb,  
But Ermytrude 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. . .

**H**ER 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.

**T**HE Sergeant sees it, and  
damns the cause  
In a truly terrible 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!

**A**T 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  
But Christmas means presents,  
she bids him beware:  
"So what do you say to a son and  
heir?  
I'm thinking of giving you  
Hun!"

**W**HAT, 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 ..."

**T**HEY 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!"

**H**E 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!

**H**E 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 wrong with that mir-  
ror?" he cries.  
But only the Sergeant's voice  
replies:  
"Wake up, Sir! The Gas—  
the Gas!"

**I**S 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!

**T**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.

**E**NSIGN 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!

**N**OTHING 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!

**T**HE 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 vapors that fringe the  
veil.

**I**T'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 de-  
sire!  
His masked lips whimper but one  
dear name—  
And so is he lost to inward shame  
That he thrills at the word:  
*"Re-tire!"*

**W**HOSE is the order, thrice  
renewed?  
Ensign Joy cannot tell :  
Only, that way lies Ermyntrode,  
And the other way this hell!  
Three men leap from the pois-  
oned fosse,  
Three men plunge from the para-  
dos,  
And—their—officer—as well!

**N**OW, as he flies at their fly-  
ing heels,  
He awakes to his deep dis-  
grace,  
But the yawning pit of his shame  
reveals  
A way of saving his face:  
He twirls his stick to a shep-  
herd's crook,  
To trip and bring one of them  
back to book,  
As though he'd been giving  
chase!

**H**E got back gasping—  
"They'd too much start!"  
"I'd've shot 'em instead!"  
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.)

**N**OW, Joy and Wren, of  
Company B,  
Are a favourite firm of mine;  
And the way they reinforced A,  
C, and D  
Was, perhaps, not unduly 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.

**N**OT a bad effort of yours,  
my lad,"  
The Major dignified 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."

**D**ARE! He has dared to de-  
sert 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.

**D**AILY and gaily he wrote to  
his wife,  
Who had dropped the beati-  
fied droll  
And was writing to him on the  
Meaning of Life  
And the Bonds between Body  
and Soul.  
Her courage was high—though  
she mentioned its height;  
She was putting upon her the  
Armour of Light—  
Including her aureole!

**B**UT never a helm had the lad  
we know,  
As he went on his nightly raids  
With a brace of his Blighters, an  
N. G O.  
And a bagful of hand-grenades  
And the way he rattled and  
harried the Hun—  
The deeds he did dare, and the  
risks he would run—  
Were the gossip of the Bri-  
gades.

**H**OW he'd stand stockstill as  
the trunk of a tree,  
With his face tucked down  
out of sight,  
When a flare went up 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.

**M**ACHINE-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.

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

**B**UT the letters they wrote  
about the boy,  
From the Brigadier to the  
men!  
They would never forget dear  
Mr. Joy,  
Not look on his like again.  
Ermytrude read them with dry,  
proud eye.  
There was only one letter that  
made her cry.  
It was from Sergeant Wren:

**T**HERE never was such a fear-  
less 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 Ermytrude's training a  
splendid boy  
Twenty years younger than En-  
sign Joy.  
On balance, a British gain!

**A**ND 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!

**Y**OUR 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.

**Y**ES! though the Candle light  
a Shrine,  
And heart cannot count the  
cost,  
You are Winners yet in its tender  
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.

**A**ND this be our comfort for  
Every Boy  
Cut down in his high heyday,  
Or ever the Sweets of the Morn-  
ing cloy,  
Or the Green Leaf wither  
away;  
So a sunlit billow curls to a crest,  
And shouts as it breaks at its  
loveliest,  
In a glory of rainbow spray!

**B**E it also the making of  
Ermyntrude,  
And many a hundred more—  
Compact of foibles and forti-

tude—  
Woo'd, won, and widow'd, in  
War.  
God, keep us gallant and unde-  
filed,  
Worthy of Husband, Lover, or  
—Child...  
Sweet as themselves at the  
core!

---

## BOND AND FREE

### (The Bapaume Road, *March 1917*)

**M**ISTY 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

**A**LL 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)

**I**T 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 un-  
loosed 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 Genera-  
tion 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!"

---

## FORERUNNERS \*

(1900)

**W**HEN 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.

\* 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)

**A**GES 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 Pollies \* —  
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?

\* *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)

**G** O 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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