

by the same author
SEQUENCES
POEMS NEWLY SELECTED

*

THE COMPLETE MEMOIRS OF GEORGE SHERSTON
MEMOIRS OF A FOX-HUNTING MAN
SHERSTON'S PROGRESS

*

THE OLD CENTURY
SIEGFRIED'S JOURNEY

COLLECTED POEMS

1908—1956

by

SIEGFRIED SASSOON



FABER AND FABER LIMITED
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Come from the sea with breadth of approaching
brightness,
When the blithe wind laughs on the hills with uplifted
voice.

When I'm among a Blaze of Lights

When I'm among a blaze of lights,
With tawdry music and cigars
And women dawdling through delights,
And officers in cocktail bars,
Sometimes I think of garden nights
And elm trees nodding at the stars.

I dream of a small firelit room
With yellow candles burning straight,
And glowing pictures in the gloom,
And kindly books that hold me late.
Of things like these I choose to think
When I can never be alone:
Then someone says 'Another drink?'
And turns my living heart to stone.

Golgotha

Through darkness curves a spume of falling flares
That flood the field with shallow, blanching light.
The huddled sentry stares
On gloom at war with white,

[14]

And white receding slow, submerged in gloom.
Guns into mimic thunder burst and boom,
And mirthless laughter rakes the whistling night.
The sentry keeps his watch where no one stirs
But the brown rats, the nimble scavengers.

A Mystic as Soldier

I lived my days apart,
Dreaming fair songs for God;
By the glory in my heart
Covered and crowned and shod.

Now God is in the strife,
And I must seek Him there,
Where death outnumbered life,
And fury smites the air.

I walk the secret way
With anger in my brain.
O music through my clay,
When will you sound again?

The Kiss

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

[15]

But as he stamped and shivered in the rain,
My stale philosophies had served him well;
Dreaming about his girl had sent his brain
Blanker than ever—she'd no place in Hell. . . .
'Good God!' he laughed, and slowly filled his pipe,
Wondering 'why he always talked such tripe'.

In the Pink

So Davies wrote: 'This leaves me in the pink'.
Then scrawled his name: 'Your loving sweetheart,
Willie'.

With crosses for a hug. He'd had a drink
Of rum and tea; and, though the barn was chilly,
For once his blood ran warm; he had pay to spend.
Winter was passing; soon the year would mend.

But he couldn't sleep that night; stiff in the dark
He groaned and thought of Sundays at the farm,
And how he'd go as cheerful as a lark
In his best suit, to wander arm in arm
With brown-eyed Gwen, and whisper in her ear
The simple, silly things she liked to hear.

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

[18]



A Working Party

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

Voices would grunt 'Keep to your right—make way!'
When squeezing past some men from the front-line;
White faces peered, puffing a point of red;
Candles and braziers glinted through the chinks
And curtain-flaps of dug-outs; then the gloom
Swallowed his sense of sight; he stooped and swore
Because a sagging wire had caught his neck.

A flare went up; the shining whiteness spread
And flickered upward, showing nimble rats
And mounds of glimmering sand-bags, bleached with
rain;

Then the slow silver moment died in dark.
The wind came posting by with chilly gusts
And buffeting at corners, piping thin.
And dreary through the crannies; rifle-shots
Would split and crack and sing along the night,
And shells came calmly through the drizzling air
To burst with hollow bang below the hill.

[19]



A Whispered Tale

Three hours ago he stumbled up the trench;
Now he will never walk that road again:
He must be carried back, a jolting lump
Beyond all need of tenderness and care.

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

That night when he was busy at his job
Of piling bags along the parapet,
He thought how slow time went, stamping his feet
And blowing on his fingers, pinched with cold.
He thought of getting back by half-past twelve,
And tot of rum to send him warm to sleep
In draughtly dug-out frowsty with the fumes
Of coke, and full of snoring weary men.

He pushed another bag along the top,
Craning his body outward; then a flare
Gave one white glimpse of No Man's Land and wire;
And as he dropped his head the instant split
His startled life with lead, and all went out.

I'd heard fool-heroes brag of where they'd been,
With stories of the glories that they'd seen.
But you, good simple soldier, seasoned well
In woods and posts and crater-lines of hell,
Who dodge remembered 'crumps' with wry grimace,
Endured experience in your queer, kind face,
Fatigues and vigils haunting nerve-strained eyes,
And both your brothers killed to make you wise;
You had no babbling phrases; what you said
Was like a message from the maimed and dead.
But memory brought the voice I knew, whose note
Was muted when they shot you in the throat;
And still you whisper of the war, and find
Sour jokes for all those horrors left behind.

'Blighers'

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

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

At Carnoy

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

July 3rd, 1916.

To His Dead Body

When roaring gloom surged inward and you cried,
Groping for friendly hands, and clutched, and died,
Like racing smoke, swift from your lolling head
Phantoms of thought and memory thinned and fled.

Yet, though my dreams that throng the darkened stair
Can bring me no report of how you fare,
Safe quit of wars, I speed you on your way
Up lonely, glimmering fields to find new day,
Slow-rising, saintless, confident and kind—
Dear, red-faced father God who lit your mind.

[22]

Two Hundred Years After

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

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

'They'

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

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;

[23]



'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.'
And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

Stand-to: Good Friday Morning

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

The Choral Union

He staggered in from night and frost and fog
And lamplless streets: he'd guzzled like a hog
And drunk till he was dazed. And now he came
To hear—he couldn't call to mind the name—

[24]

But he'd been given a ticket for the show,
And thought he'd (hiccup) chance his luck and go.

The hall swam in his eyes, and soaring light
Was dazzling splendid after the dank night.
He sat and blinked, safe in his cushioned seat,
And licked his lips; he'd like a brandy, neat.

'Who is the King of Glory?' they were saying,
He pricked his ears; what was it? Were they praying? . . .
By God, it might be Heaven! For singers stood
Ranked in pure white; and everyone seemed good;
And clergymen were sitting meekly round
With joyful faces, drinking in the sound;
And holy women, and plump whiskered men,
Could this be Heaven? And was he dead? And then
They all stood up; the mighty chorus broke
In storms of song above those blameless folk;
And 'Hallelujah, Hallelujah!' rang
The burden of the triumph that they sang.

He gasped; it *must* be true; he'd got to Heaven
With all his sins that seventy times were seven;
And whispering 'Hallelujah' mid their shout,
He wondered when Lord God would turn him out.

The One-Legged Man

Propped on a stick he viewed the August weald;
Squat orchard trees and oasts with painted cows;

[25]

A homely, tangled hedge, a corn-stalked field,
And sound of barking dogs and farmyard fowls.

And he'd come home again to find it more
Desirable than ever it was before.
How right it seemed that he should reach the span
Of comfortable years allowed to man!
Splendid to eat and sleep and choose a wife,
Safe with his wound, a citizen of life.
He hobbled blithely through the garden gate,
And thought: 'Thank God they had to amputate!'

Enemies

He stood alone in some queer sunless place
Where Armageddon ends. Perhaps he longed
For days he might have lived; but his young face
Gazed forth untroubled: and suddenly there thronged
Round him the hulking Germans that I shot
When for his death my brooding rage was hot.

He stared at them, half-wondering; and then
They told him how I'd killed them for his sake—
Those patient, stupid, sullen ghosts of men;
And still there seemed no answer he could make.
At last he turned and smiled. One took his hand
Because his face could make them understand.

[26]



The Tombstone-Maker

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

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

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

Arms and the Man

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

The waiting-room was dark and bare.
He eyed a neat-framed notice there
Above the fireplace hung to show
Disabled heroes where to go

[27]

The Road

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

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

Secret Music

I keep such music in my brain
No din this side of death can quell;
Glory exulting over pain,
And beauty, garlanded in hell.

[32]

My dreaming spirit will not heed
The roar of guns that would destroy
My life that on the gloom can read
Proud-surgin' melodies of joy.

To the world's end I went, and found
Death in his carnival of glare;
But in my torment I was crowned,
And music dawned above despair.

Before the Battle

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

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

June 25th, 1916.

[33]

Counter-Attack

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

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

An officer came blundering down the trench:
'Stand-to and man the fire-step!' On he went . . .
Gasping and bawling, 'Fire-step . . . counter-attack!'

[68]

Then the haze lifted. Bombing on the right
Down the old sap: machine-guns on the left;
And stumbling figures looming out in front.
'O Christ, they're coming at us!' Bullets spat,
And he remembered his rifle . . . rapid fire . . .
And started blazing wildly . . . then a bang
Crumpled and spun him sideways, knocked him out
To grunt and wriggle: none heeded him; he choked
And fought the flapping veils of smothering gloom,
Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans . . .
Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned,
Bleeding to death. The counter-attack had failed.

The Rear-Guard

(HINDENBURG LINE, APRIL 1917)

Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
He winked his prying torch with patching glare
From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.
Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know;
A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;
And he, exploring fifty feet below
The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw some one lie
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug,
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
'I'm looking for headquarters.' No reply.
'God blast your neck!' (For days he'd had no sleep,)
'Get up and guide me through this stinking place.'

[69]

Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,
And flashed his beam across the livid face
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard ten days before;
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

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

Writers

'Pass it along, the wiring party's going out'—
And yawning sentries mumble, 'Writers going out.'
Unravelling; twisting; hammering stakes with muffled
thud,

They toil with stealthy haste and anger in their blood.

The Boche sends up a flare. Black forms stand rigid there,
Stock-still like posts; then darkness, and the clumsy

ghosts
stride hither and thither, whispering, tripped by
clutching snare
Of snags and tangles.

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

[70]

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

Attack

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that
shroud

The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

Dreamers

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

[71]



Soldiers are dreamers ; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives.

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

How to Die

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

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

[72]

The Effect

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

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

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

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

[73]

Twelve Months After

Hullo! here's my platoon, the lot I had last year.
'The war'll be over soon.'

'What 'opes?'

'No bloody fear!'

Then, 'Number Seven, 'shun! All present and correct.'

They're standing in the sun, impassive and erect.

Young Gibson with his grin; and Morgan, tired and
white;

Jordan, who's out to win a D.C.M. some night;

And Hughes that's keen on wiring; and Davies ('79),

Who always must be firing at the Boche front line.

'Old soldiers never die; they simply fide a-why!'

That's what they used to sing along the roads last spring;

That's what they used to say before the push began;

That's where they are to-day, knocked over to a man.

The Fathers

Snug at the club two fathers sat,

Gross, goggle-eyed, and full of chat:

One of them said: 'My eldest lad

Writes cheery letters from Bagdad.

But Arthur's getting all the fun

At Arras with his nine-inch gun.'

'Yes,' wheezed the other, 'that's the luck!

My boy's quite broken-hearted, struck

[74]

In England training all this year.
Still, if there's truth in what we hear,
The Huns intend to ask for more
Before they bolt across the Rhine.'
I watched them toddle through the door—
These impotent old friends of mine.

Base Details

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,

I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,

And speed gum heroes up the line to death.

You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,

Reading the Roll of Honour. 'Poor young chap,
I'd say—I used to know his father well;

Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap.'

And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed.

The General

'Good-morning; good-morning!' the General said

When we met him last week on our way to the line.

Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,

And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.


'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack

As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

[75]

In some wiped-out impossible Attack.
'Impressions ? Yes, most vivid! I am writing
A little book called *Europe on the Rack*,
Based on notes made while witnessing the fighting.
I hope I've caught the feeling of 'the Line',
And the amazing spirit of the troops.
By Jove, those flying-chaps of ours are fine!
I watched one daring beggar looping loops,
Soaring and diving like some bird of prey.
And through it all I felt that splendour shine
Which makes us win.'
The soldier sipped his wine.
'Ah, yes, but it's the Press that leads the way!'



Suicide in the Trenches

I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.
In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain,
No one spoke of him again.

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

[78]

Glory of Women

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

Their Frailty

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

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

[79]

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

The Hawthorn Tree

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

Not much to me is yonder lane
Where he so longs to tread:
But when there's been a shower of rain
I think I'll never weep again
Until I've heard he's dead.

The Investiture

God with a Roll of Honour in His hand
Sits welcoming the heroes who have died,
While sorrowless angels ranked on either side
Stand easy in Elysium's meadow-land.

[80]

Then you come shyly through the garden gate,
Wearing a blood-soaked bandage on your head;
And God says something kind because you're dead,
And homesick, discontented with your fate.

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

Trench Duty

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

[81]

Autumn

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

Invocation

Come down from heaven to meet me when my breath
Chokes, and through drumming shafts of stifling death
I stumble toward escape, to find the door
Opening on morn where I may breathe once more
Clear cock-crow airs across some valley dim
With whispering trees. While dawn along the rim
Of night's horizon flows in lakes of fire,
Come down from heaven's bright hill, my song's desire.
Belov'd and faithful, teach my soul to wake
In glades deep-ranked with flowers that gleam and shake
And flock your paths with wonder. In your gaze
Show me the vanquished vigil of my days.
Mute in that golden silence hung with green,
Come down from heaven and bring me in your eyes
Remembrance of all beauty that has been,
And stillness from the pools of Paradise.

[88]



Repression of War Experience

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

Now light your pipe; look, what a steady hand.
Draw a deep breath; stop thinking; count fifteen,
And you're as right as rain . . .

Why won't it rain? . . .

I wish there'd be a thunder-storm to-night,
With bucketful of water to sluice the dark,
And make the roses hang their dripping heads.
Books; what a jolly company they are,
Standing so quiet and patient on their shelves,
Dressed in dim brown, and black, and white, and green,
And every kind of colour. Which will you read?
Come on; O do read something; they're so wise.
I tell you all the wisdom of the world
Is waiting for you on those shelves; and yet
You sit and gnaw your nails, and let your pipe out,
And listen to the silence: on the ceiling
There's one big, dizzy moth that bumps and flutters;
And in the breathless air outside the house
The garden waits for something that delays.
There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees,—

[89]



Not people killed in battle,—they're in France,—
But horrible shapes in shrouds—old men who died
Slow, natural deaths,—old men with ugly souls,
Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins.

You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;
You'd never think there was a bloody war on! . . .

O yes, you would . . . why, you can hear the guns.

Hark! Thud, thud, thud,—quite soft . . . they never
cease—

Those whispering guns—O Christ, I want to go out
And screech at them to stop—I'm going crazy;

I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

Survivors

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.

Of course they're 'longing to go out again,'—

These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.

They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed

Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—

Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be
proud

Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride . . .

Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;

Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

Craiglockart. October, 1917.

[90]

Joy-Bells

Ring your sweet bells; but let them be farewells

To the green-vista'd gladness of the past

That changed us into soldiers; swing your bells

To a joyful chime; but let it be the last.

What means this metal in windy belfries hung

When guns are all our need? Dissolve these bells

Whose tones are tuned for peace: with martial tongue

Let them cry doom and storm the sun with shells.

Bells are like fierce-browed prelates who proclaim

That 'if our Lord returned He'd fight for us.'

So let our bells and bishops do the same,

Shoulder to shoulder with the motor-bus.

Remorse

Lost in the swamp and welter of the pit,

He flounders off the duck-boards; only he knows

Each flash and spouting crash,—each instant lit

When gloom reveals the streaming rain. He goes

Heavily, blindly on. And, while he blunders,

'Could anything be worse than this?'—he wonders,

Remembering how he saw those Germans run,

Screaming for mercy among the stumps of trees:

Green-faced, they dodged and darted: there was one

Livid with terror, clutching at his knees . . .

Our chaps were sticking 'em like pigs . . . 'O hell!'

He thought—'there's things in war one dare not tell

Poor father sitting safe at home, who reads

Of dying heroes and their deathless deeds.'

[91]