

FICTION

Richard Le Gallienne

**The Silk-Hat
Soldier and
Other Poems in
War Time**

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FICTION

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THE SILK-HAT SOLDIER AND OTHER POEMS IN WAR TIME

BY
RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

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To
HIS MAJESTY
ALBERT I.
KING OF THE BELGIANS
THE HEROIC CAPTAIN
OF AN
HEROIC PEOPLE

CONTENTS

	PAGE
TO BELGIUM	9
THE SILK-HAT SOLDIER	11
THE CRY OF THE LITTLE PEOPLES	14
THE ILLUSION OF WAR	20
CHRISTMAS IN WAR-TIME	22
"SOLDIER GOING TO THE WAR"	29
THE RAINBOW	30

TO BELGIUM

*Our tears, our songs, our laurels--what are these
To thee in thy Gethsemane of loss,
Stretched in thine unimagined agonies
On Hell's last engine of the Iron Cross.*

*For such a world as this that thou shouldst die
Is price too vast--yet, Belgium, hadst thou sold
Thyself, O then had fled from out the earth
Honour for ever, and left only Gold.*

*Nor diest thou--for soon shalt thou awake,
And, lifted high on our victorious shields,
Watch the new sunrise driving for your sons
The hated German shadow from your fields.*

*"British colonists resident in London volunteer, and not even silk hats are doffed
before training begins"*

--New York Times

THE SILK-HAT SOLDIER

I saw him in a picture, and I felt I'd like to cry--

He stood in line,
The man "for mine,"
A tall silk-hatted "guy"--
Right on the call,
Silk hat and all,
He'd hurried to the cry--
For he loves England well enough for England to die.

I've seen King Harry's helmet in the Abbey hanging high--
The one he wore
At Agincourt;
But braver to my eye
That city toff
Too keen to doff
His stove-pipe--bless him--why?
For he loves England well enough for England to die.

And other fellows in that line had come too on the fly,
Their joys and toys,
Brave English boys,
For good and all put by;
O you brave best,
Teach all the rest
How pure the heart and high
When one loves England well enough for England to die.

One threw his cricket-bat aside, one left the ink to dry;
All peace and play
He's put away,
And bid his love good-bye--
O mother mine!
O sweetheart mine!
No man of yours am I--
If I love not England well enough for England to die.

I guess it strikes a chill somewhere, the bravest won't deny,
All that you love,
Away to shove,
And set your teeth to die;
But better dead,
When all is said,
Than lapped in peace to lie--
If we love not England well enough for England to die.

THE CRY OF THE LITTLE PEOPLES

The Cry of the Little Peoples went up to God in vain;
The Czech and the Pole, and the Finn, and the Schleswig Dane:

We ask but a little portion of the green, ambitious earth;
Only to sow and sing and reap in the land of our birth.

We ask not coaling stations, nor ports in the China seas,
We leave to the big child-nations such rivalries as these.

We have learned the lesson of Time, and we know three things of worth;
Only to sow and sing and reap in the land of our birth.

O leave us little margins, waste ends of land and sea,
A little grass, and a hill or two, and a shadowing tree;

O leave us our little rivers that sweetly catch the sky,
To drive our mills, and to carry our wood, and to ripple by.

Once long ago, as you, with hollow pursuit of fame,
We filled all the shaking world with the sound of our name,

But now are we glad to rest, our battles and boasting done,
Glad just to sow and sing and reap in our share of the sun.

Of this O will ye rob us,--with a foolish mighty hand,
Add with such cruel sorrow, so small a land to your land?

So might a boy rejoice him to conquer a hive of bees,
Overcome ants in battle,--we are scarcely more mighty than these--

So might a cruel heart hear a nightingale singing alone,
And say, "I am mighty! See how the singing stops with a stone!"

Yea, he were mighty indeed, mighty to crush and to gain;
But the bee and the ant and the bird were the mighty of brain.

And what shall you gain if you take us and bind us and beat us with thongs,
And drive us to sing underground in a whisper our sad little songs?

Forbid us the very use of our heart's own nursery tongue--
Is this to be strong, ye nations, is this to be strong?

Your vulgar battles to fight, and your grocery conquests to keep,
For this shall we break our hearts, for this shall our old men weep?

What gain in the day of battle--to the Russ, to the German, what gain,
The Czech, and the Pole, and the Finn, and the Schleswig Dane?

The Cry of the Little Peoples goes up to God in vain,
For the world is given over to the cruel sons of Cain;

The hand that would bless us is weak, and the hand that would break us is strong,
And the power of pity is nought but the power of a song.

The dreams that our fathers dreamed to-day are laughter and dust,
And nothing at all in the world is left for a man to trust;

Let us hope no more, or dream, or prophesy, or pray,
For the iron world no less will crash on its iron way;

Yea! nothing is left but to watch, with a helpless, pitying eye,
The kind old aims for the world, and the kind old fashions die.

THE ILLUSION OF WAR

War
I abhor,
And yet how sweet
The sound along the marching street
Of drum and fife, and I forget
Wet eyes of widows, and forget

Broken old mothers, and the whole
Dark butchery without a soul.

Without a soul--save this bright drink
Of heady music, sweet as hell;
And even my peace-abiding feet
Go marching with the marching street,
For yonder, yonder goes the fife,
And what care I for human life!
The tears fill my astonished eyes
And my full heart is like to break,
And yet 'tis all embannered lies,
A dream those little drummers make.

O it is wickedness to clothe
Yon hideous grinning thing that stalks
Hidden in music, like a queen
That in a garden of glory walks,
Till good men love the thing they loathe.
Art, thou hast many infamies,
But not an infamy like this;
O snap the fife and still the drum,
And show the monster as she is.

CHRISTMAS IN WAR-TIME

1

This is the year that has no Christmas Day,
Even the little children must be told
That something sad is happening far away--
Or, if you needs must play,
As children must,
Play softly children, underneath your breath!
For over our hearts hangs low the shadow of death,
Those hearts to you mysteriously old,
Grim grown-up hearts that ponder night and day
On the straight lists of broken-hearted dead,
Black narrow lists no tears can wash away,
Reading in which one cries out here and here
And falls into a dream upon a name.
Be happy softly, children, for a woe
Is on us, a great woe for little fame,--
Ah! in the old woods leave the mistletoe,
And leave the holly for another year,
Its berries are too red.

2

And lovers, like to children, will not you
Cease for a little from your kissing mirth,
Thinking of other lovers that must go
Kissed back with fire into the bosom of earth,--
Ah! in the old woods leave the mistletoe,
Be happy, softly, lovers, for you too
Shall be as sad as they another year,
And then for you the holly be berries of blood,

And mistletoe strange berries of bitter tears.
Ah! lovers, leave you your beatitude,
Give your sad eyes and ears
To the far griefs of neighbour and of friend,
To the great loves that find a little end,
Long loves that in a sudden puff of fire
With a wild thought expire.

3

And you, ye merchants, you that eat and cheat,
Gold-seeking hucksters in a noble land,
Think, when you lift the wine up in your hand,
Of a fierce vintage tragically red,
Red wine of the hearts of English soldiers dead,
Who ran to a wild death with laughing feet--
That we may sleep and drink and eat and cheat.
Ah! you brave few that fight for all the rest,
And die with smiling faces strangely blest,
Because you die for England--O to do
Something again for you,
In this great deed to have some little part;
To send so great a message from the heart
Of England that one man shall be as ten,
Hearing how England loves her Englishmen!
Ah! think you that a single gun is fired
We do not hear in England. Ah! we hear,
And mothers go with proud unhappy eyes
That say: It is for England that he dies,
England that does the cruel work of God,
And gives her well beloved to save the world.
For this is death like to a woman desired,
For this the wine-press trod.

4

And you in churches, praying this Christmas morn,
Pray as you never prayed that this may be
The little war that brought the great world peace;
Undazzled with its glorious infamy,
O pray with all your hearts that war may cease,
And who knows but that God may hear the prayer.
So it may come about next Christmas Day
That we shall hear the happy children play
Gladly aloud, unmindful of the dead,
And watch the lovers go
To the old woods to find the mistletoe.
But this year, children, if you needs must play,
Play very softly, underneath your breath;
Be happy softly, lovers, for great Death
Makes England holy with sorrow this Christmas Day;
Yes! in the old woods leave the mistletoe,
And leave the holly for another year--
Its berries are too red.

[*Christmas, 1899--Written during the Boer War.*]

"SOLDIER GOING TO THE WAR"

Soldier going to the war--

Will you take my heart with you,
So that I may share a little
In the famous things you do?

Soldier going to the war--

If in battle you must fall,
Will you, among all the faces,
See my face the last of all?

Soldier coming from the war--

Who shall bind your sunburnt brow
With the laurel of the hero,
Soldier, soldier--vow for vow!

Soldier coming from the war--

When the street is one wide sea,
Flags and streaming eyes and glory--
Soldier, will you look for me?

THE RAINBOW

"These things are real," said one, and bade me gaze

On black and mighty shapes of iron and stone,
On murder, on madness, on lust, on towns ablaze,
And on a thing made all of rattling bone:

"What," said he, "will you bring to match with these?"

"Yea! War is real," I said, "and real is Death,
A little while--mortal realities;
But Love and Hope draw an immortal breath."

Think you the storm that wrecks a summer day,

With funeral blackness and with leaping fire
And boiling roar of rain, more real than they
That, when the warring heavens begin to tire,
With tender fingers on the tumult paint;
Spanning the huddled wrack from base to cope
With soft effulgence, like some haloed saint,--
The rainbow bridge eternal that is Hope.

Deem her no phantom born of desperate dreams:

Ere man yet was, 'twas hope that wrought him man;
The blind earth, climbing skyward by her gleams,
Hoped--and the beauty of the world began.
Prophetic of all loveliness to be,
Though God Himself seem from His station hurled,
Still shall the blackest hell look up and see
Hope's rainbow on the summits of the world.