

# A SONG OF THE GUNS

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*Cover*

## A SONG OF THE GUNS

BY  
GILBERT FRANKAU, R.S.A.

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#### NOTE

*A Song of the Guns* was written under what are probably the most remarkable conditions in which a poem has ever been composed. The author, who is now serving in Flanders, was present at the battle of Loos, and during a lull in the fighting—when the gunners, who had been sleepless for five nights, were resting like tired dogs under their guns—he jotted down the main theme of the poem. After the battle the artillery brigade to which he was attached was ordered to Ypres, and it was during the long trench warfare in this district, within sight of the ruined tower of Ypres Cathedral, that the poem was finally completed. The last three stanzas were written at midnight in Brigade Headquarters with the German shells screaming over into the ruined town.

#### CONTENTS

The Voice of the Slaves  
Headquarters  
Gun-Teams  
Eyes in the Air  
Signals  
The Observers  
Ammunition Column  
The Voice of the Guns

## A SONG OF THE GUNS

These are our masters, the slim  
    Grim muzzles that irk in the pit;  
That chafe for the rushing of wheels,  
    For the teams plunging madly to bit  
As the gunners wing down to unkey,  
    For the trails sweeping half-circle-right,  
For the six breech-blocks clashing as one  
    To a target viewed clear on the sight—  
Gray masses the shells search and tear  
    Into fragments that bunch as they run—  
For the hour of the red battle-harvest,  
    The dream of the slaves of the gun!

We have bartered our souls to the guns;  
    Every fibre of body and brain  
Have we trained to them, chained to them. Serfs?  
    Aye! but proud of the weight of our chain,  
Of our backs that are bowed to their workings,  
    To hide them and guard and disguise,  
Of our ears that are deafened with service,  
    Of hands that are scarred, and of eyes  
Grown hawklike with marking their prey,  
    Of wings that are slashed as with swords  
When we hover, the turn of a blade

From the death that is sweet to our lords.

## THE VOICE OF THE SLAVES

*By the ears and the eyes and the brain,  
     By the limbs and the hands and the wings,  
 We are slaves to our masters the guns;  
     But their slaves are the masters of kings!*

## HEADQUARTERS

A league and a league from the trenches,  
     from the traversed maze of the lines,—  
 Where daylong the sniper watches and daylong the  
     bullet whines,  
 And the cratered earth is in travail with mines and  
     with countermines,—

Here, where haply some woman dreamed, (are  
     those her roses that bloom  
 In the garden beyond the windows of my littered  
     working-room?)  
 We have decked the map for our masters as a bride  
     is decked for the groom.

Here, on each numbered lettered square,—cross-road  
     and mound and wire,  
 Loop-hole, redoubt, and emplacement, are the targets  
     their mouths desire,—  
 Gay with purples and browns and blues, have we  
     traced them their arcs of fire.

And ever the type-keys clatter; and ever our keen  
 wires bring  
 Word from the watchers a-crouch below, word  
 from the watchers a-wing;  
 And ever we hear the distant growl of our hid guns  
 thundering;

Hear it hardly, and turn again to our maps, where  
 the trench-lines crawl,  
 Red on the gray and each with a sign for the  
 ranging shrapnel's fall—  
 Snakes that our masters shall scotch at dawn, as is  
 written here on the wall.

For the weeks of our waiting draw to a close....  
 There is scarcely a leaf astir  
 In the garden beyond my windows where the  
 twilight shadows blur  
 The blaze of some woman's roses....  
 "Bombardment orders, sir."

## GUN-TEAMS

Their rugs are sodden, their heads are down, their  
 tails are turned to the storm.  
 (Would you know them, you that groomed them  
 in the sleek fat days of peace,—  
 When the tiles rang to their pawings in the lighted  
 stalls and warm,—  
 Now the foul clay cakes on breeching-strap and  
 clogs the quick-release?)

The blown rain stings, there is never a star, the  
 tracks are rivers of slime.  
 (You must harness up by guesswork with a

failing torch for light,  
 Instep-deep in unmade standings, for it's active-service time,  
     And our resting weeks are over, and we move  
     the guns to-night.)

The iron tires slither, the traces sag; their blind  
     hooves stumble and slide;  
     They are war-worn, they are weary, soaked with  
     sweat and sopped with rain.  
 (You must hold them, you must help them, swing  
     your lead and centre wide  
     Where the greasy granite pave peters out to  
     squelching drain.)

There is shrapnel bursting a mile in front on the  
     road that the guns must take:  
     (You are nervous, you are thoughtful, you are  
     shifting in your seat,  
 As you watch the ragged feathers flicker orange  
     flame and break)–  
     But the teams are pulling steady down the  
     battered village street.

You have shod them cold, and their coats are long,  
     and their bellies gray with the mud;  
     They have done with gloss and polish, but the  
     fighting heart's unbroke.  
 We, who saw them hobbling after us down white  
     roads flecked with blood,  
     Patient, wondering why we left them, till we  
     lost them in the smoke;

Who have felt them shiver between our knees,  
     when the shells rain black from the skies,  
     When the bursting terrors find us and the lines  
     stampede as one;  
 Who have watched the pierced limbs quiver and  
     the pain in stricken eyes,  
     Know the worth of humble servants, foolish-faithful

to their gun!

## EYES IN THE AIR

Our guns are a league behind us, our target a mile below,  
 And there's never a cloud to blind us from the haunts of  
     our lurking foe—  
 Sunk pit whence his shrapnel tore us, support-trench crest-  
     concealed,  
 As clear as the charts before us, his ramparts lie revealed.  
 His panicked watchers spy us, a droning threat in the void;  
 Their whistling shells outfly us—puff upon puff, deployed  
 Across the green beneath us, across the flanking grey,  
 In fume and fire to sheathe us and balk us of our prey.

Below, beyond, above her,  
     Their iron web is spun!  
 Flicked but unsnared we hover,  
     Edged planes against the sun:  
 Eyes in the air above his lair,  
     The hawks that guide the gun!

No word from earth may reach us save, white against the ground,  
 The strips outspread to teach us whose ears are deaf to sound:  
 But down the winds that sear us, athwart our engine's shriek,  
 We send—and know they hear us, the ranging guns we speak.  
 Our visored eyeballs show us their answering pennant, broke  
 Eight thousand feet below us, a whirl of flame-stabbed smoke—  
 The burst that hangs to guide us, while numbed gloved fingers tap  
 From wireless key beside us the circles of the map.

Line—target—short or over—  
     Comes, plain as clock-hands run,  
 Word from the birds that hover,  
     Unblinded, tail to sun—



Word out of air to range them fair,  
 From hawks that guide the gun!

Your flying shells have failed you, your landward guns are dumb:  
 Since earth hath naught availed you, these skies be open! Come,  
 Where, wild to meet and mate you, flame in their beaks for breath,  
 Black doves! the white hawks wait you on the wind-tossed  
     boughs of death.

These boughs be cold without you, our hearts are hot for this,  
 Our wings shall beat about you, our scorching breath shall kiss:  
 Till, fraught with that we gave you, fulfilled of our desire,  
 You bank,—too late to save you from biting beaks of fire,—

Turn sideways from your lover,  
     Shudder and swerve and run,  
 Tilt; stagger; and plunge over  
     Ablaze against the sun,—  
 Doves dead in air, who clomb to dare  
     The hawks that guide the gun!

## SIGNALS

The hot wax drips from the flares  
 On the scrawled pink forms that litter  
 The bench where he sits; the glitter  
 Of stars is framed by the sandbags atop of the dug-out stairs.  
 And the lagging watch-hands creep;  
 And his cloaked mates murmur in sleep,—  
 Forms he can wake with a kick,—  
 And he hears, as he plays with the pressel-switch, the strapped  
     receiver click  
 On his ear that listens, listens;  
 And the candle-flicker glistens  
 On the rounded brass of the switch-board where the red wires  
     cluster thick.

Wires from the earth, from the air;  
 Wires that whisper and chatter  
 At night, when the trench-rats patter  
 And nibble among the rations and scuttle back to their lair;  
 Wires that are never at rest,–  
 For the linesmen tap them and test,  
 And ever they tremble with tone:–  
 And he knows from a hundred signals the buzzing call of his own,  
 The breaks and the vibrant stresses,–  
 The Z and the G and the S's  
 That call his hand to the answering key and his mouth to the  
 microphone.

For always the laid guns fret  
 On the words that his mouth shall utter,  
 When rifle and Maxim stutter  
 And the rockets volley to starward from the spurting parapet;  
 And always his ear must hark  
 To the voices out of the dark,–  
 For the whisper over the wire,  
 From the bombed and the battered trenches where the wounded  
 moan  
 in the mire,–  
 For a sign to waken the thunder  
 Which shatters the night in sunder  
 With the flash of the leaping muzzles and the beat of battery-fire.

## THE OBSERVERS

Ere the last light that leaps the night has hung and shone and died,  
 While yet the breast-high fog of dawn is swathed about the  
 plain,  
 By hedge and track our slaves go back, the waning stars for guide,  
 Eyes of our mouths; the mists have cleared, the guns would  
 speak again!

Faint on the ears that strain to hear, their orders trickle down  
 "Degrees—twelve—left of zero line—corrector one three eight—  
 Three thousand." ... Shift our trails and lift the muzzles that  
     shall drown  
 The rifle's idle chatter when our sendings detonate.

Sending or still, these serve our will; the hidden eyes that mark  
     From gutted farm, from laddered tree that scans the furrowed  
     slope,  
 From coigns of slag whose pit-ropes sag on burrowed ways and dark,  
     In open trench where sandbags hold the steady periscope.

Waking, they know the instant foe, the bullets phutting by,  
     The blurring lens, the sodden map, the wires that leak or break!  
 Sleeping, they dream of shells that scream adown a sunless sky—  
     And the splinters patter round them in their dug-outs as they  
     wake.

Not theirs, the wet glad bayonet, the red and racing hour,  
     The rush that clears the bombing-post with knife and hand-  
     grenade;  
 Not theirs the zest when, steel to breast, the last survivors cower,—  
     Yet can ye hold the ground ye won, save these be there to aid?

These, that observe the shell's far swerve, these of the quiet voice,  
     That bids "go on," repeats the range, corrects for fuse or line...  
 Though dour the task their masters ask, what room for thought or  
     choice?  
     This is ours by right of service, heedless gift of youthful eyne!

Careless they give while yet they live; the dead we tasked too sore  
     Bear witness we were naught begrudged of riches or of youth;  
 Careless they gave; across their grave our calling salvoes roar,  
     And those we maimed come back to us in proof our dead speak

truth!

## AMMUNITION COLUMN

*I am only a cog in a giant machine, a link of an endless chain:—*

*And the rounds are drawn, and the rounds are fired,*

*and the empties return again;*

*'Railroad, lorry, and limber; battery, column, and park;*

*'To the shelf where the set fuse waits the breech, from*

*the quay where the shells embark.*

We have watered and fed, and eaten our beef; the

long dull day drags by,

As I sit here watching our "Archibalds" *strafing* an empty sky;

Puff and flash on the far-off blue round the speck

one guesses the plane—

Smoke and spark of the gun-machine that is fed by the endless chain.

I am only a cog in a giant machine, a little link in the chain,

Waiting a word from the wagon-lines that the guns are hungry

again:—

*Column-wagon to battery-wagon, and battery-wagon to gun;*

*To the loader kneeling 'twixt trail and wheel from the*

*shops where the steam-lathes run.*

There's a lone mule braying against the line where

the mud cakes fetlock-deep!

There's a lone soul humming a hint of a song in

the barn where the drivers sleep;

And I hear the pash of the orderly's horse as he

canters him down the lane—

Another cog in the gun-machine, a link in the selfsame chain.

I am only a cog in a giant machine, but a vital link in the chain;

And the Captain has sent from the wagon-line to

fill his wagons again;—

*From wagon-limber to gunpit dump; from loader's forearm at breech*

*To the working party that melts away when the shrapnel  
bullets screech.—*

So the restless section pulls out once more in column  
of route from the right,  
At the tail of a blood-red afternoon; so the flux of another night  
Bears back the wagons we fill at dawn to the sleeping column again...  
Cog on cog in the gun-machine, link on link in the chain!

## THE VOICE OF THE GUNS

We are the guns, and your masters! Saw ye our flashes?  
Heard ye the scream of our shells in the night, and the  
shuddering crashes?  
Saw ye our work by the roadside, the gray wounded lying,  
Moaning to God that he made them—the maimed and the dying?  
Husbands or sons,  
Fathers or lovers, we break them! We are the guns!

We are the guns and ye serve us! Dare ye grow weary,  
Steadfast at nighttime, at noontime; or waking, when dawn  
winds blow dreary  
Over the fields and the flats and the reeds of the barrier water,  
To wait on the hour of our choosing, the minute decided for slaughter?  
Swift the clock runs;  
Yes, to the ultimate second. Stand to your guns!

We are the guns and we need you! Here in the timbered  
Pits that are screened by the crest and the copse  
where at dusk ye unlimbered,  
Pits that one found us—and, finding, gave life (did  
he flinch from the giving?);  
Laboured by moonlight when wraith of the dead  
brooded yet o'er the living,  
Ere with the sun's

Rising the sorrowful spirit abandoned its guns.

Who but the guns shall avenge him? Strip us for action!  
Load us and lay to the centremost hair of the dial-sight's refraction.  
Set your quick hands to our levers to compass the sped soul's assoil-  
ing;

Brace your taut limbs to the shock when the thrust  
of the barrel recoiling

Deafens and stuns!

Vengeance is ours for our servants. Trust ye the guns!

Least of our bond-slaves or greatest, grudge ye the burden?  
Hard is this service of ours which has only our service for guerdon:  
Grow the limbs lax, and unsteady the hands, which  
aforetime we trusted;

Flawed, the clear crystal of sight; and the clean  
steel of hardihood rusted?

*Dominant ones,*

*Are we not tried serfs and proven—true to our guns?*

*Ye are the guns! Are we worthy? Shall not these speak for us,  
Out of the woods where the torn trees are slashed with  
the vain bolts that seek for us,  
Thunder of batteries firing in unison, swish of shell fighting,  
Hissing that rushes to silence and breaks to the thud of alighting?  
Death that outruns*

*Horseman and foot? Are we justified? Answer, O guns!*

Yea! by your works are ye justified,—toil unrelieved;  
Manifold labours, coördinate each to the sending achieved;  
Discipline, not of the feet but the soul, unremitting, unfeigned;  
Tortures unholy by flame and by maiming, known, faced, and dis-  
dained;

Courage that shuns

Only foolhardiness;—even by these are ye worthy your guns!

Wherefore—and unto ye only—power has been given;  
Yea! beyond man, over men, over desolate cities and riven;  
Yea! beyond space, over earth and the seas and the  
sky's high dominions;

Yea! beyond time, over Hell and the fiends and  
 the Death-Angel's pinions!  
 Vigilant ones,  
 Loose them, and shatter, and spare not. We are the guns!

THE END

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