

THE REFUGEE

By H. SMALLEY SARSON

THE cobbled road, with rustling poplars lined,
Stretches before me, reaches back behind
Where fields, dyke-bordered, lie dusty and
bare,

Shimmering and dancing in the glare.
Breaking the silence of the noonday heat,
A piteous shuffling of weary feet,
An infant's cry, a child that's lost and calls,
A sob as some poor tired cripple falls;
I watch, the tide of sorrow onward runs
To the accompaniment of distant guns.

An old man white with age, a year-old bride,
Her younger sister trembling at her side;
A mother with her family of four
Staring dry-eyed, trudging on before
Her boy, who walks as going to the grave,
Pushing a cart with all that they could save,
Sticks and a chair, a jug, a crust of bread,
The only things they rescued from the dead;
Such are the sights that make my heart recoil,
Blocking the roads that lead from Belgian
soil.

They never smile, these peasants passing by,
They do not laugh or chatter as they fly
And leave their homes in the invaders' hand,
Whilst they beg succour from an alien land.
Sometimes a wife, with red and swollen eyes,
Scarce noticing her baby's piteous cries,
Will sob her tale of sorrow, but no smile
Will greet you as they flee mile after mile;
For, ever with the hapless traveller runs
The distant muttering of giant guns.

A farmer's cart, its heavy swaying load
Threatening to fall upon the cobbled road,
Passes; the child perched high upon the top
Cries to the jaded steed if it should stop;
The farmer and his wife, a dog or so,
Follow; though they know not where they go.
And then a girl, alone, clutched to her breast
Her few possessions; onward she hurries lest
She, too, should perish; I try to calm her fears.
This is her tale of misery and tears:

In happiness they lived, life was a game
Six months ago, and then the Germans came.

Her father and her brothers faced the foe,
She had not seen them since and did not
know

If they were living or if they were dead;
Her mother and her three young sisters fled
To seek whatever comfort they could find,
Leaving all they loved and prized behind;
Yet one by one they died, and now bereft
Of all her family, she alone was left.

She told me of her home, the tiny farm
Nestling amongst the trees, rich with the
charm

That only years of care and toil can bring;
How every morn the convent bells would ring
And wake them, to a day untinged with care:
Now, only blackened walls were standing
there,

The crumbling bricks lay scattered all around,
A few charred rafters rotting on the ground,
A rusty plough, some broken garden tools,
Left by the lust of Kings, the greed of Fools.

She had a lover. Ah! her eyes grew dim,
Her lips, in anguish, showed her thoughts of
him;

As children together often they would play,
Till growing passion chased their games away
And left them shy, scarce knowing what to
do,

Longing yet finding not the way to woo.
Becoming bolder as the years passed,
She yielded her red lips to him at last
As his betrothed, his wife she would have
been;

Then gruesome war thrust its sword between.

And so she goes—to join the crowd again,
The crowd of refugees that search in vain,
And I am left alone to ponder long
Upon their misery, upon their wrong.
I told her, "God will set your country free."
"God! There is no God," she answered me.
And so the more I think the more perplexed
My mind becomes, till lastly sorely vexed
I write the evidence for all to see:
The sorrows of a Belgian Refugee.

(Written at Vlamertinghe and Poperinghe, April, 1915).