

Some Poetry of the War



RUPERT BROOKE

More than three hundred volumes of verses have been written, with some phase of the war as the entire subject. A dozen anthologies have already been issued, and more are in preparation. "The Poets' Corner" of every newspaper contains fugitive verse on the war, and some of it worthy of permanent preservation. War verse dominates in the magazines. The human aspirations and passions, the emotional analyses and manifestations that, with the visible and natural world, constitute the basic poetic material, today are seen through, and colored by, the red mists that enwrap all civilization.

This is inevitable. Literature is Life, and Poetry, Passion. Confronted by Armageddon, with personal, social, national, racial ideals of liberty imperilled, men think deeply, feel acutely, react powerfully. It would be unthinkable that this reaction should not find vent in poetry, the most permanent of all the great avenues of human expression.

It is a popular, but mistaken, expectation that great events necessarily produce great poetry. But it is not the biggest battles that have inspired the finest military and patriotic poems. Troy was an obscure town in Asia Minor: Balaclava was not one of the world's decisive battles. Lowell's "Commemoration Ode" is perhaps the only poem qualified for a

place in the world's golden treasury of all that poured from the white hot crucible of the American Civil War. And the present war, though it has produced an enormous bulk of poetry, much of it good, some of it excellent, has produced little that promises to be immortal. There are several reasons for this. Foremost among them has been placed the vastness, the immensity, the complexity of the struggle. It is not merely a life and death conflict of millions upon millions of men, fighting on a dozen fronts, in fertile farmlands, in arid deserts, on snowy steppes. These innumerable hosts are fighting in the heavens above, on the earth beneath, and in the waters under the earth—fighting not only with weapons of hitherto unimagined destructive power, and of unbelievable precision and ingenuity, but also with weapons as primitive as those used by the Philistines and Romans, and with adaptations of the plate armour of medieval knights. They are fighting each other with the science of the bacteriologist and of the chemist,—with disease germs, flame, and chlorine gases. Normally peaceful occupations are in reality the reserve forces of the titanic conflict—the shipyards of Seattle, Vancouver and elsewhere are in reality as much part of the battleground as the martial scenes in the training camps at Work Point, Hastings Park or Camp Lewis. The smudged-faced, overall-clad men of the forge and smithy, the stoop shouldered men of office and loom, all are as much integral elements of the fighting forces as those wearing chevrons or epaulettes on khaki uniforms. Capital has ranged itself alongside Labor—symptom of a new national unity—and is freely contributing to the cause of democracy and international righteousness its powers of financial organization. Wives and mothers are planning economical meals, and thus by serving in the national army of conservation are as truly "doing their bit" as their Red Cross sisters in hospital ward and dressing station. A thousand forces—military and naval, social and financial, industrial and economic—are inextricably interwoven in this war. Their ramifications have such interrelations and reactions that they affect, if not personally and directly, at least subconsciously, the most humdrum and prosaic lives. Foremost of these, the name of Rupert Brooke suggests itself. His noble quintette of sonnets bid fair to be part of the imperishable heritage of mankind. They are perfect expression, not merely of a human, but a national soul. His spirit is part of the