

Shadowed Victory

by

ARTHUR STRINGER

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by

ARTHUR STRINGER

AUTHOR OF

Irish Poems, Out of Erin,

The Old Woman Remembers,

The King Who Loved Old Clothes, etc.



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SHADOWED VICTORY

I

*The harvests have been gathered,
The plough's good work is done;
Once more the umber furrows
Drink in the autumn sun.*

*And dark the earth lies waiting
For newer gifts to yield
Where sleep now turns to service
In every patient field.*

*So even life lies fallow
When tired hearts rest again
That seeds which sleep with silence
May wave as ripened grain—*

*That they who found love fleeting
And once too freely gave
May know some greener April
Beyond the winter's grave.*

The prairie faced the foothills, and the hills
Flowed westward to the Rockies, crystal white
In autumn air so clear it made the far
Snow-covered peaks seem neighbourly and close.
High in the azure arch of heaven wheeled
An eagle, indolently vigilant,
While through the lower air lanes drifts of teal
And mallard roved the wheatlands for the feed
A million heavy sheaves had left behind,
And as the day grew older, wavered off
And floated like a cloud above far sloughs
Where sedge and rush could screen their coming sleep.

It seemed a world of opulence at rest,
And as Clyde Barlow toiled his tractor back
And forth across the dark-loamed prairie floor,
Where lonely as a ship on lonely waves
The gang-plough keeled the russet stubble-rows
And left wide swathes of umber in its wake,
He knew a sense of power combined with peace.

Though denim-clad and stained with oil, he sat
High on his tractor seat as on a throne,
With something kinglike in the wolf-lean frame,
The lank hard-muscled shoulders that still held
The slackened posture of the prairie-born,
A careless sinewed strength the sledge of toil
Had hammered to the texture of tried steel
And fashioned to earth's anviled fortitude.
Yet touched with pride he rode, with patience in
The prairie-squint about the mild brown eyes
That took the brooding hardness from the face
So saddle-brown, so tanned by wind and sun.
His brow was tranquil as he made his turn
And marked how straight each mile-long furrow lay,
How silver-bright each polished mouldboard shone,
How wide the darker landsides slowly grew,
How eagerly the earth drank in the sun,
And, having given much, now asked for rest.

The prairie lay so placid that the sound
Made by an army truck that rocked along
The distant road seemed almost insolent,
Proclaiming to lone ploughmen that the peace
About them must be earned by bolder hands.

The crowded truck stopped at Clyde's furrow-ends
And blithe Hugh Bidwell clambered down to greet
His gang-plough friend so grey with floating dust.

"We're off at last!" cried Hugh, and happiness
Beamed from him as he stood so spick and span
In army cap and creaseless uniform.
"Tomorrow we entrain for Halifax,
So here's good-bye, old top, and luck to you—
When you'll be rounding up your bloody steers
And I'll be busy rounding Adolf up!"

Hugh laughed and took the other's earth-stained hand

And heard Clyde answer: "Happy landing, Hugh,
And come back safe to brighten up our days,
And when you come, let's hope you're bringing back
A brand-new world to cheer sodbusters up!"

Clyde watched the truck fade down the dusty road
And heard the soldiers singing as they went.
He turned back to his work and wondered why
The sun had lost a little of its warmth.
He should be happy, he contended, with
These patient acres that he ploughed and reaped.
He viewed that furrowed sea, remembering
This was the land he loved, the mother earth
That bared her breast to many a hungry mouth,
The waiting loam that took the scattered seed
And in its time grew big with ripened grain.
Its very dust left him of richer dust;
Its fibres reached and twined about his heart
And held him as a tree is held by roots
That creep down through the hidden depths of time.
It was the dim and luring Far-Away
His father, craving space, had sought and found,
The land to which his youthful mother came
From Kansas, on slow creaking wagon wheels,
Her milch cow at the tailboard as they went
Through dust and sun, with wonder in their eyes,
Outspanning in the lone cool northern dusk
And breaking camp at dawn and going on
With all their settlers' little world made up
Of what they carried with them, axe and gun,
Side meat and meal sack, pot and frying-pan,
Tined fork and spade and pail, a weathered plough
Lashed proudly at the prairie schooner's side,
And a hunger to inhale the breath of peace
About them as they toiled and built their home,
An island home amid a sea of grass,
A sod hut roofed with yellow clay, baked hard
As the hands that worked between its windswept walls.

It was the land where, as a happy boy,
Clyde once rode herd, and with a straining team
Broke sod, and mowed the hay that fringed the sloughs,
And hauled his loads of poplar firewood home,
And saw the widening acres tamed and fenced
And a lordlier house supplant the hut of sod,
And a panting thing of steel and gas displace
The creaking harness and the plodding horse.

Clyde stopped his engine and sat looking up
At a far-off flash of wings that drank the air
And showed themselves as not the wings of birds.
Above him in the sky, where puffs of cloud
Floated like languid swans in liquid blue,
An army plane came pulsing from the west,
A sheen of floating silver in the sun.
It banked and dipped and circled, roaring loud
Above his upturned face, came lower still
And dropped a shining something on the soil
A stone's throw from the gang-plough where he sat.

Clyde, puzzled, clambered from his throne of iron
And found half-buried in the crumbled soil
A can of house paint, with the label "Yellow."

The dark face turned still darker as he read
"The tint for slackers," written on its side.
He stood a moment, motionless as stone,
Then, breathing deeper, went with laggard steps
Back to the waiting tractor grey with dust
And slowly mounted to the seat of iron
That seemed no more a throne.

That taunt, he knew,
Had come from Buckshot Frome, who strode about
In his new sergeant's uniform and stripes
And scoffed at craven souls who rustled corn
When all their world was threatened by the Hun.
There had been words beside the flying-field
Where Buckshot questioned if Clyde chose to stay
A husky with a cream puff for a heart.

"You'd best sign up and drop the hayseed rôle;
Clodhoppers don't stack high in times like these."

Clyde knew he was no coward; he could fight
As well as any man. That had been proved
When with a caught-up bole of oak he faced
And drove away the berserk Durham bull
That would have killed his father. And again,
Last threshing-time, a lank spike-pitcher stood
High on his bundle-wagon forking sheaves
Down on the feeder where the steel jaws whined;
He slipped and fell along the loosened grain
The roaring cylinder was eating up.
Clyde heard a frantic shout, and quick as thought
Flung his full weight against the engine belt
And freed it from the wheel and stopped in time
The steel-fanged jaws that might have fed on flesh.
The impact flung him like a feather through
The startled group of watchers, till a voice
In the sudden silence brought his senses back:
"Takes guts and brains to throw a belt like that!"

No, he was not a coward. But this war
Was not for him. His was the humbler task,
The world of toil where no torn banners waved,
The sterner path where no proud bugles shrilled.
He felt at times the tug, but not for him
The fields of glory crowned with blood and waste.
His lonely path lay on the patient land
That grew the bread of life. Yet even here
He found grim enemies in drought and frost
And hail and rust, in weeds and creeping pests
That made all crops uncertain, things to fight
Hard day by day as bitterly as Huns.

His thoughts went to the near-by Nelson Ranch
With its last man enlisted and abroad,
Its fields grown wild with dock and tumbleweed,
Its rusted ploughs and barns with gaping doors,
Its homeless cattle scattered on the range
And two gaunt women eking out a life
Of loneliness made sharp with bitter want.
He thought of his own father hobbling round
The kitchen range and putting things to right,
A crippled gaunt old man with withered eyes
Who once had loved his land and mastered it,
Yet like an ailing eagle sat alone
And woke to peel the spuds and lay the cloth
And do the housework his dead wife had done.

"I'm needed here," said Clyde, as grim of brow
He turned the rippling furrows where in time
A sea of grain would greet the August sun
That the hunger of the world might be appeased.

He scanned the wide horizon bathed in light
That seemed to melt in waves of empty space
And a sense of loneliness crept over him.
Then of a sudden all those dreary plains
Took on a warmer tone. For down the trail
That wound between the wheatlands and the sloughs
He saw a drifting figure. And he knew
That figure was the woman of his dreams.
He stopped his tractor at the road-allowance
And watched the loping pinto and the girl
Who seemed to ride as light as thistledown,
As though the woman and the horse were one.
He wondered, as he saw her wind-blown hair
And caught the budded contour of her lips,
If his resolve to cleave to prairie life
Depended on her being a part of it.
His sad eyes drank her beauty as she swung
So lightly from the saddle, smiled at him,
And tied her pinto to a willow post.

"Oh, Clyde, I had to come!"

And happiness
Welled through him at her words, then died away.
"Tomorrow Hugh must go. He must be off
To do his bit, and maybe give his life

To make that brave new world he dreams about.
This is his last night here, and he has asked
For me to drive him to the waiting train
And speed him on his way."

"Hugh talked with me,"

Said Clyde, "and seemed quite glad, of course, he'd soon
Be cannon fodder on the firing line."

"Oh, he'll come back; I feel it in my bones.
But while he's here we must be good to Hugh,
And the most that I can do is motor him
Through those last miles from home. You do not care?"

They sat together where the sun-bleached grass
Was brown and tawny as a lion's back.
Clyde's musing, at the moment, was on Hugh,
Blue-eyed, lighthearted Hugh who laughed his way
Through life and with his hilltop diffidence
Accepted what was dark and what was sweet,
A rolling stone who gathered no remorse
And gave no thought to what might lie behind.

"I do not care," Clyde answered. But a stab,
A faint phantasmal stab akin to pain,
Went through his heart, remembering
How Hugh and this rapt woman that he loved
Would laugh and talk and be together through
The long-houred evening as the stars came out
And darkness settled on the prairie trail.

"The thing I care about," he quietly said,
"Is that you keep a little love for me."
She smiled at that and let her softened eyes
Rest on him for a moment. Then she said:
"You work too hard; your face looks tired and thin."

He stared about the furrows in the sun.
"Clodhoppers have to keep their taxes paid,"
He answered, and his laugh held little mirth.
"I wish," she murmured, "you were free to go."

He hid his wince, but in the brooding eyes,
Above his smile, there lurked a bitter light.
"We can't, Lynn, all be heroes, even though
You'd love to see me decked with stripes and stars
And that dull tractor turned an army tank."

Lynn laughed and said: "I love you as you are,
But I feel you're missing something out of life."
He turned and studied long that treasured face.

"The only thing I'd never want to miss
Is you," he answered as he took her hand.
Her smile, at that, was smothered in a sigh.

"You are so different from footloose Hugh
Who eats the fruit and flings away the core.
Some men can live, I know, close to the land
And stay contented with their crops and cows,
But those meek stay-at-homes like me and you
Must surely miss a glow the others get.
Hugh may be danger-loving, yet I like
That strain of boyish wildness in his blood
That leaves him free to dare and laugh at death.
We must be kind to him. For all too soon
He'll face cold steel and know the bark of guns
And give his body up to save the world."

"I hope," Clyde said, as he observed her eyes
Assess the lowering sun, "that Hugh comes back
As sound in wind and limb as when he left,
With this old world made over and the days
Of humbler workers once more dignified."

He watched the rainbow-haloed figure as
It loped off down the trail and soon grew small
Along the tawny plain and passed away.
Then with a touch of grimness on his face
He turned back to his tractor and took up
His task of ploughing as the slanting light
Of sunset gave a glory to the land.
Wars came and went and empires passed away,
He told himself, as dark the riven loam
Rolled wavelike from each mouldboard's drifting curve,
But this endured, this was the timeless thing

That never changed, and he was part of it.

II

1

*"It will freeze tonight," an aged voice said,
"So cut whatever comes into your head:
All flowers left facing this first black frost
When day breaks cold you can count as lost."
So forth she went at the close of day
To save what winter might carry away:
And heavy the harvest she gathered in
As the air grew sharp and the light grew thin.*

2

*"Tomorrow," her true love murmured low,
"It's off to the front we fighting men go,
To die, if we must, where our betters have died—
And this is our last night side by side."
When she thought of her true love cold in his grave
There seemed nothing to question, nothing to save,
And knowing the quick give naught to the dead,
"You may take what you like," she quietly said.*

The Northern Lights showed green and rose along
The fading sky line where the far world stopped;
The stars were soft above the sleeping earth
And clear and winelike was the prairie air
With all its autumn keenness softened by
A warm chinook that crept down from the peaks
So dark against the slowly paling west.
It bathed the rolling plainlands in a peace
That seemed the breath of Eden. Side by side
The rose-lipped woman and the brooding man
Rode on in silence, feeling strangely near.
Hugh was the first to speak.

"Good-bye, old world!

This time next month I'll be in England, Lynn,
'That precious stone set in a silver sea'—
With pea-soup fog and no clear air like this.
We'll live in sheds and tents and curse the rain
And march through mud and toughen up on hikes
Where English hills are dark with winter gorse,
And sweat and grouse and learn to crawl and stab
And make our faces black for midnight raids."
She searched his face and saw dour laughter there.
"Don't be too reckless, Hugh. We want you back
When all the bloodshed and the sound of bombs
Is just a broken dream, and life once more
Goes on as calmly as these sleeping homes."

"Perhaps," said Hugh, "I'll not be coming back."
He sat a moment silenced by her gasp
Of protest touched with pain, then said to her:
"But if I stay a little pile of dust
Somewhere between the Channel and the Rhine
I'll have the memory of this last night
With you. This last brief happiness will be
My bright and one remembered precious stone
Set in war's foggy sea of frightfulness."

They stopped to watch the full moon coming up,
A disc of gold above the prairie's rim.
"Don't talk of war," Lynn said, and took his hand.
"There is so little time before you go."

"So little time," said Hugh, "and people learn
How precious is the present when the hand
Of Death is at tomorrow's door. It leaves
The living mad to drain the cup of life
And throw away the dregs. And here and now
I want the memory of your lips on mine
To light me through my hours of loneliness.
Kiss me," he said.

"We must remember Clyde,"

She murmured with a flutter in her voice.
"Why think of Clyde? This hour belongs to us,
And we are lost here in a sea of stars
And all the clocks of all the world have stopped."

He caught the tremor in her troubled throat,
The stifled sigh that seemed almost a sob,

The little moan of protest, touched with fear,
As though some last support were failing her.
He took her in his arms and held her close
And all their mad world crumbled to a mist.
The mild autumnal moon climbed higher in
The star-strewn arch, the arch that many a time
Looked down on mortals groping through their dreams
And reaping sorrow where they reached for joy.
And all the stars swung on, with unconcern,
It was so old a story, youth and love,
Weakness and rapture, man and woman tossed
Like rustling leaves along a windy world,
And Eden grown a garden of regret.

III

*Lend me a red rose for her lips,
A white rose for her breast,
And for her smile the saddened light
That lures late suns to rest.*

*Lend me the white-throat's mellow call
Across the noonday heat,
The wine-glow from too distant peaks,
The wind on ripened wheat.*

*Lend me the murmurous peace of pines,
The slender grace of firs,
And I from these shall know again
The beauty that was hers.*

*Lend me the sound of moon-lit waves
That fringe some ghostly tide,
And she again will walk with me
And whisper at my side.*

*For now she fares in other fields,
And time forgets, forgives—
But oh, how in my empty heart
Her vanished beauty lives!*

Clyde, out at dawn to round his cattle up,
Swerved from his course and found the Landsdale ranch
Still wrapped in sleep, and knew that Lynn was back.
Yet a vague uneasiness crept through his veins
And phantom shadows fell across his heart
As he scanned the walls that housed her slumbering head,
The garden paths her glad feet often pressed,
The climbing rose that he had given her
Now drooping lifeless in the morning light.
He turned away, and as he turned he saw
A dust-stained motor rocking hurriedly
Along the trail still blurred with early mists.
And then his heart stopped and his hardened eyes
Grew narrow.

For the driver of the car
Was Lynn, a white-faced and rebellious Lynn
Who stopped the hurrying wheels and silently
Confronted the grim man who barred her way.
Clyde did not speak at first. His steady gaze
Took in the wearied lines about her lips
And on her barricaded face discerned
The trampled look that made him think of fields
Where wind and storm have beaten down the grain.
And still he did not speak. But in his blood
A creeping coldness made his eyes like ice.
He leaned still closer to her shadowed face
And looked deep in her eyes, demanding that
Which neither had the heart to put in words.

She knew too well just what that question was.
And knew, as well, the answer. But no sound
Came from her mournful lips, though eloquent
As any low reluctant whisper seemed
The tears that washed the face she turned away.
Clyde shut his teeth and kept the mad cry in,
The cry: "And so you gave this night to Hugh!"
He groped for something stable in a world
He scarcely knew; and all the bitterness
Of broken faith and hopes that fell apart,
Like banded sheaves too roughly thrown aside,
Crept slowly through his body, watching her.

"Oh, you will hate me after this," she said.
He drew away a wondering step or two,
And gazed at her as though a boundless gulf
Already lay between her face and his.
"Hugh was my friend. And you were more than that,"
Was all he said across their widening gulf.
"The time for words is past."

Then tight of lip
He swung into the saddle and rode back
To his own land. And as he slowly crossed
Those acres gilded with the morning sun

He told himself that this was all he had,
The one thing now he could be loyal to,
The final thing to hold his broken faith,
The land that still could drink his manhood up.

IV

*What knew he of that bosom deep
Whereof the hungry have been fed,
Where warm the waiting harvests sleep
And broken men may turn for bread?*

*What knew he of that sun-bathed land
Where soft the golden noondays bask?
Or of the quick, ungrudging hand
With which she gives to them who ask?*

*Knew he those summers long and sweet
When on her hills the feeding droves
And on her plains the ripened wheat
Made her our Lady of the Loaves?—*

*The lakes, the lordly rivers where
The laden ships weave back and forth
That hungry countries grey with care
Might drain the largesse of our North?*

*And if in white she deigns to sleep,
Green floats her girdle in the Spring
Where warm her bosom is and deep
And doubly dear her wakening.*

When an early freeze made all the prairie soil
As hard as stone Clyde teamed his wheat to town.
The yield, that year, was heavy. Granaries
Were crowded to the brim; field bins were gorged
And capped with straw, while sweating workers built
Rough-boarded sheds to hold the overflow
When cow-barns had been filled and unused shacks
Stood crowded to their sills with kernelled gold,
And even emptied house rooms were piled high
With precious pyramids whose Pharaohs were
Uncounted layers of tawny-crusted loaves
(While staring waifs amid the hills of Greece
Fought tiger-eyed about a mouldy crust),
On many a farm, so ample was the flood
Of that small nutlike fruit once fathered by
Wild grasses in forgotten Syria,
Great mounds of naked grain lay on the ground,
Exposed to wind and weather, hail and snow,
Kept dormant by the cold yet threatened with
The coming rains of spring that quickly touched
The sleeping slopes of yellow into life
And thatched each hillock with a film of green.

Clyde on his grain box, with his two great teams
Hitched double-tandem, swung along the trail
And saw, high up, the wild geese heading south,
And saw, in time, the scattered prairie town
Of Buckhorn, like so many other towns—
The water tank, the threads of polished steel
Where high above the humbler huddled homes
The tall lone kingly elevators met
The morning light and sentineled the sky.

He faced the clustered buyers, who knew wheat
As casually as farmers come to know
Their long-ploughed land. He sat in stoic calm
As samples made the rounds, then took his grade,
And slowly tooled his laden wagon up
The gangway to the scales above the pit
Where streams of gold were pumped to gaping bins.
And as he watched the fruit of weariness
And thought and planning sing into the pit
He knew a sense of power.

This was his part,
This giving from his toil to hungry towers
That fed in turn the far-assembled trains
Of boxcars rolling to the plunging Lakes.
This was his part, this precious gift of wheat
That like a river of fresh-minted gold
Flowed eastward, ever eastward, to the sea
And still moved on, moved on, through fog and mist,
And, cannon-watched and convoy-herded, keeled
The grey Atlantic to grey English ports,

To ravaged Russia, to the war-torn towns
Where famished children snatched at fallen crusts,
To empty countries where the crawling tanks
And belching guns left hunger in their wake.

There was scant glory in it. Yet he watched
A squad of khaki'd rookies swinging past,
Sun-tanned, quick-stepping, rifle-bearing youths
With eager eyes—and he half envied them.

Yet someone, he affirmed, must stay behind
To keep their armies fed, and not for him
The bugles and the drums, but daily toil,
Toil that could claim a glory not of guns
And bombs and battleships and tattered flags.
His rôle would have to be the humbler rôle,
The unrecorded life behind the lines
Of hate and hunger and bewilderment.

When, homeward bound, he passed the Landsdale ranch,
The thought of Lynn glowed in the ashes of
His solitary days. He felt it strange
He now saw nothing of her. And an ache
Of deprivation touched with sharper pain
Surged through him as he passed the willow gate
Where once the two of them had often leaned.

His father told him, in the empty house,
That seemed more empty as the year grew old,
How Neighbour Landsdale had dropped in that day
And talked about the war, and, casual-voiced,
Explained his daughter Lynn had joined the CWACs
And with her class had just been bundled off
To take a boat for England and the front.

“That girl can drive a truck or tool a cat
As deft as any hulk in denim could,
And like as not, before the fighting's through,
You'll hear she's captain of a ten-ton tank
And headed for the castles on the Rhine.”

Clyde pushed his plate away and absently
Gazed out across the prairie's opal rim
And wondered if Lynn's journey overseas
Was less to take her to the castled Rhine
Than to some camp where she'd be close to Hugh.

V

*A land, for all its wounds, where roses blow
And lawns are soft with summer rains,
A land of languid hours and ivied homes
And old men walking older lanes.*

*An ordered land that broods on Yesterday,
Of eyes that turn to earlier years,
Of haunted dusks and hills that harbour dreams,
A country old in time and tears.*

*But oh! my heart goes, homesick, back today,
Back to the wide free prairie's sweep,
Back to the pines that brought the sunset near,
Back where the great white Rockies sleep!*

*For I am tired of dusk and dream and rose,
Of ghosts and glories dead and gone,
Give me the open trail, the upward sweep,
The New World and the widening dawn!*

If Hugh kept in his heart some echo of
That last mad night amid the prairie gloom,
The throb of rapture and the thin regret
That threw a mist about brief happiness,
He had a hard new life to fill his days
And sponge the crowded slate of memory.
He even found a solace in long hours
Of drill and strenuous training, battle drill
And not the dull parade-square show of arms
That seemed so endless in his earlier camp.
Hugh, posted with the South Saskatchewan,
Took pride in being among those prairie-born
Tough-fibred lawless wildcats from the West
Forever raising Cain in English pubs
And grousing at the grub and at the mud
And singing "Wagon Wheels" and "Round-up Time"
But clamouring loudest to get at the Hun.
"There are no muckers in McNaughton's men
And when we make the jump, look out for us!"
But the jump was slow in coming. Week by week
And month by month they trained and sang and toiled.
They toiled with hand grenades and Tommy guns,
Sten guns, Bren guns, and belt-held mortar shells.
They learned to slink and hide and crawl like snakes
And give the quick garrotte and stab and slash
With bright long-bladed knives and clamber up
A web of landing rope and storm a wall
And man and beach a steel-lipped landing barge
With salt waves licking at their laughing chins,
And cut a path through tangles of barbed wire
And plant a mine and swarm across the sand
And kill and take ghost prisoners in the gloom,
Since these were picked Commandos hardening for
Some unknown tourney, when the time was ripe.
To Hugh it seemed like football tactics tried
And learned in lighter-hearted college days—
The huddles as platoon commanders told
Just what the play would be, the new surprise
Where cunning took the place of open pass
And ordered feint and ruse outwitted brawn.
Hugh had, at first, no hatred for the Hun.
He had known German settlers in the West,
Hard-working frugal tillers of the soil
With happy sons and music in their homes,
And in his youth a blue-eyed German girl
Had made a summer rich with love for him.
But as he wandered through the blighted streets
Of London where the fury of the blitz
Had left its record of stark suffering,
And when he saw the wounded ferried back
From Channel sea fights where the dull guns barked,
And later when sleek Messerschmitts
Swooped low and swerved to spit their hail of hate
Along the sleeping camp, and Hugh could see
The telltale flash of orange at the tip

Of rattle-throated guns that vomited
Hot lead on helpless sleepers, and discerned
The flash of red that decked each cannon's mouth,
He wakened to the fact that all his world
Had changed and darkened, as a field of wheat
Changes when thunderclouds shut out the sun.
It had gone back, abruptly, to the age
Of claw and fang, and brute opposing brute.
So at his target practice, from that hour,
The circled disc became a German heart,
The swinging sack through which his bayonet stabbed
Thereafter, in his fancy, was a Boche.
The bitter wine of hatred filled his blood
And made him want to kill and hunger for
The moment he could meet their steel with steel
And have it out with them.

But day by day

The peaceful Devon town remained their home,
The grass between the tents was trodden thin,
The weathered tunics showed a trace of wear,
The guns were oiled, the knives honed razor-sharp,
While grapevine rumours spread and died away
And the sun-browed sons of Mars still moodily
Drank down their pints of bitter, smoked their fags
Through games of poker and chuck-wagon songs
And in the dusk walked out with village girls.

But still those sons of Mars were hardened up
And still the hikes between the camp and coast
Continued, and mock battles still were fought
And newer plans of camouflage explored
And quicker modes for killing men devised,
While restless youth all ready to consign
Its frail and breathing body to the blast
Of sudden lead and sinew-tearing shell
Still irked and asked: "When *do* we go across?"

The summer lengthened into autumn and
The soft-aired English autumn dark with rain
Merged into winter—not the winter Hugh
Had known and welcomed in his jocund North
Where blizzards threw their blankets of blown snow
Across the sleeping world, to die away
And leave the razor-keen subarctic air
A ghostly wine that made the body glow,
But more a winter of mild discontent,
Of mist and rain and sodden meadowland
To which the dawning spring came tardily
And brought the cuckoo and the primrose back—
And better weather for the winnowing planes
To sweep the coast and reap their sheaves of death.

Those blossoming song-haunted days of spring
Were darkened by grim news that darker grew
As summer kept still green the hills and downs
Of England in her soft encircling seas
That stood no more a moat against the world.
A yellow tidal wave had seethed and swept
Across the startled East and tumbled on
To lap the outpost shores of India,
Bataan had fallen, then Corregidor,
El Alamein was lost, Sevastopol
Went down before the thundering German guns
That seemed to hold the startled world in pawn,
The towers of Coventry lay in the dust,
And even on the ice-capped Kiska hills
The banners of the Rising Sun flew high.

But on a sultry August noon the word
The South Saskatchewan had waited for
Was quietly given, and a thrill of joy
Went through the camp, and armed and eager men
Sped off in lorries, singing lustily
And throwing kisses to the clustered girls
Who wondered what their mission, and what lads
Their empty arms would ever hold again.

VI

*Intent within the curtained room we wait
For echoes from that far-off world of hate
Where on the anvil of inexorable
And final force men shape their final will.
(All day vague whispers and wild rumours came
To put our ceremonial calm to shame.)
And now across the night that shuts us in
There breaks the brusque etheric bulletin
As, far afield, a phantom voice relates
The news for which a tensioned nation waits.*

*But having gleaned war's tabulated woe,
I leave the garrulous listeners and go
Out to the star-strewn silence of the night,
Where, in the soft and unimpassioned light
Of a mounting golden moon against a sky
Of silvered tenderness, I wonder why
A world all black with blood and battle smoke
Should so forget the words a Herdsman spoke,
And, bombed and torn and spent and cannon-shocked,
Reed down a road where angels might have walked.*

Clyde, in a world that seemed at times remote
From all that outer world where fury reigned,
Was not quite happy on those lonely nights
When, with his milking and his stable chores
And the household work a woman should have done
All finished, he could sit and listen to
The war news on his wan-voiced radio.
The messages it carried from a world
Of pain and tumult and uncertainty
Still left him with the feeling that his days
Were given up to pale and paltry ends
When all that men could fight and perish for
Was threatened by the grim and godless Goth.

He was not happy in that prairie home
Where the kettle simmered on the glowing stove
And the winter winds that whined about the eaves
Turned four strong walls into a place of peace.
Yet in that world of placid joylessness
He wrung contentment from his stabled stock,
His horses at their mangers munching hay,
His milch cows in their stalls, well bedded down,
His straw-floored sheds a place of shadowy warmth,
And his last labours of the day being done
By lantern light.

His thoughts at such a time
Would wander from his work, and often he
Would question why no word came back from Lynn
And under what far stars, that night, she fared.
He thought of Hugh, the Hugh he could not hate,
Yet through his heart a blade of pain would stab
And though he did his best to shut the door
On memories so tangled up with pain,
Still through his sleep the clouded thoughts would crowd
And leave him bitter-minded when he woke.

But darker days awaited him. Before
The winter passed away his father died.
The ailing eagle left the earthly cage,
Yet struggling with his last breath, whispered low:
"Whatever happens, son, cleave to your land."

The pioneer, now bound for happier lands
Where new horizons called, was buried in
The white-fenced plot beside the poplar grove
Where his good wife so long awaited him.
And Clyde went back to that too empty house
Where silence filled the rooms.

But when spring came
He had small time to think about how still
A house could be, how pained a heart could beat.
The greening prairie floor where gophers played,
The honk of wild geese in the green-blue sky,
Was a call to arms for him. The warmer sun
Meant the old round of labour on the soil
Impatient for its seed, the ancient race

Against that waiting foeman known as Time,
This was his battle, yet a battle fought
In long and silent hours of loneliness
With no reserves of manpower at his call.
The war had drained away all helping hands;
And when the struggle took a helpless turn
His door was darkened by a blonde Brunhild
Who said in broken English she could work
As well as any man.

 The started Clyde
Gazed at the calm-eyed goddess in rough clothes,
The young wide-shouldered Valkyr with brown hands
And brawny arms and eyes of brooding blue,
And took her in and from reluctant lips
Learned why she stood alone on foreign soil.

 She had escaped from Norway in a ketch
Of kindly fisher folk, and joined her kin
Already safe in England, then had sailed
With them to seek new life in that New World
Where stricken people might once more know peace.
But Fate, on her, still dealt a final blow,
For in a train-wreck east of Calgary
The crowded cars took fire and she alone
Of all that tragic family was saved.
Her name was Freya Earling, she explained,
And she was strong, and if he needed help
She'd labour in the fields or in the house
And milk and bake and keep things orderly.

 " There are no women here," Clyde said to her,
" And you are young, and soon the neighbourhood
Would talk about a girl alone with me."

 The mild eyes measured him. " I do not care,"
She answered with a shrug. " I need a home
As much as you must need a woman's help."

 He viewed the twisted braids of tawny gold,
The milk-white bosom screened by faded blue,
The full red lips and placid azure eyes,
And told her it was worth the trying out.

 He led her in, and showed her where to sleep,
And knew a surge of pity as he saw
The hempen sack that held her worldly goods.
Yet from the day she moulded her first loaf
In that disordered house, a change took place.
The walls of silence seemed to come to life
And Clyde's bald evenings lost their solitude.
Out in the open fields she toiled with him
And, mounted on a double-seeder, made
Him think of some thick-torsoed goddess from
Old sagas and Norse songs, of Ceres on
A cloud of drifting dust and tumbleweed,
A blonde Persephone in cowhide boots.

 And when the day was over he would sit
And study her thick ropes of pallid gold,
Her full red lips that phrased their faltering words,
Her queenly rustic vigour touched with calm,
Her woman's rounded throat that flowed away
Into the richness of the heaving breast,
And soon an Indian Summer sort of peace,
That in the end was anything but peace,
Crept through the troubled autumn of his days.
He liked to think of Freya's opulent
Young body fast asleep beneath the roof
Where his tired body rested, near and yet
So far away. He even wondered at
The sense of something missing, something lost,
When for two days he went to Calgary
To clear the mortgage from the Barlow ranch
And found himself in sudden carnival
As that blithe city held its big " Stampede"
Where dust and tumult and the tossing flags,
The music and the marching and the crowds
Seemed of another planet to the son
Of earth and toil who walked in loneliness.

Clyde watched the cowboys from the grass and sage,
The prairie schooners of another age,
The flags and bunting and the blaring bands,
The busy peddlers with their sidewalk stands,
The marching rookies with their steady tramp,
The young braves from the emptied Sarcee camp,
Then stood arrested as that marching throng
Grew thinner, and an old Chief rode along
The valley of white faces clustered where
His tribesmen once had hunted wolf and bear.

Grim-lipped and lean and taciturn as stone,
He scorned the cheering crowds, and rode alone.
The shaggy-flanked cayuse he sat astride
Seemed but a frame of sullen bones and hide,
Yet kingly was the posture, kingly waved
The eagle feathers round a face engraved
With more than Time.

Majestical in rags,
He rode between the flapping alien flags,
The urban tumult and the towers of steel
And turbinéd power and hurrying shaft and wheel.
And silence like a blanket hung about
The face of bronze above the city's rout
That left him thrice alone. Yet who could tell
What lurked behind those eyes inscrutable,
Where, seamed and gaunt, the old face stared ahead,
The dulled mind held communion with its dead,
As, spindrift of the past, he blew along
The bannered street between the pale-face throng
That seemed but ghosts to him?

Erect and stern
He rode, and saw the sunset glory burn
Along the Rockies, and the wine-glow pale
Above each far and unforgotten trail
Forever closed to him, From each blank wall
Of brick and stone he heard no frontier call.
He carried in his filmed and faded eye
No answer to the gaze of Verendrye.
Now all the aquiline old look was gone
That met the challenge of swart Radisson.
He merely scanned the mountains dark with pine,
The tawny plains, the pulsing hyaline,
The luring flash of rivers where his glance
Was clouded by the fleur-de-lis of France,
The covered wagon, and the rails of steel
Down which the white man's thundering engines reel.

Silent he rode, the sunset in his eyes,
Sadly resplendent in his foolish dyes,
Each bauble on his breast, each tawdry plume
Of nodding feathers, but a badge of doom;
A king in rags, still crowned with dignity,
An old wolf caged, yet pining to be free,
Grinding his worn fangs on the ghostly bars
That kept him from his kinship with the stars,
The curling rivers and the woodland camps
That through the mists of time went out like lamps,
The teepee clusters on the sun-washed range
That shrank and altered in a world of change,
The bellowing herd, the long sault's happy roar,
The worn portages he would know no more.

So out along the tumult and the crowd
He passed as slow and silent as a cloud;
Remote, aloof, alone, he filtered on
To ghostlier trails from which the light had gone.
Heedless of crazy drum and cited strife
And laughter, he went riding out of life.

And Clyde, when that dulled waif of other days
Went drifting through the city's evening haze,
Asked in a mood of sombre inner strife
If all his labour and his yeoman life,
The trivial grain his grinding toil amassed,
Was not a relic of man's simpler past
Now that the reaping and the harvesting

Seemed peasantlike, and such a little thing.

VII

*Beyond the slough where one lone bittern wades,
The green and opal sky line slowly fades,
And at the world's rim, miles and miles away,
The afterglow turns down the lamp of day.
The stars come out, and cool the breath of night
Steal through the prairie dusk, the dying light.
And on the meadowed floor of emptiness
No hurrying feet of hurried mortals press,
Where star-lit space and silence lie so deep
The world and all it holds seems lost in sleep.
And yet I know a city where on nights
Like this, its fevered anthills fringed with lights,
Its walls so like a grilliron from the sun,
The streets stand breathless when the day is done
And through them pant the heat-distracted crowds
Like throngs of tortured ghosts in flimsy shrouds
Who steal half-frenzied from each fetid room
And seek their straitened bed of grass and gloom
Where men and women floor a crowded park
And sleep, a tumbled army in the dark,
Sleep side by side, like scattered sheaves of wheat,
In August's panting brotherhood of heat.*

The night was clear and mild, an August moon
Paved all the Channel with a path of gold
And on the curtained troopship creeping towards
The slowly paling East no lights were shown.
But men were there, men busy oiling guns
And fusing hand grenades and whetting knives
Or smoking under-deck and making jokes
To mask their inner tension, chuckling till
The bulky life belts round their shoulders shook—
Yet abruptly sober when the sound of guns
Came to them from the Channel darkness where
Commando Number Three was startled by
A German convoy creeping through the gloom.

A frowning captain watched a telltale flare
Light up the drifting line and muttered low:
"We'll not get Fritzie with his pants down now!"
If men fell silent as they drifted on
And watched the dark hills on the brightening East
Where break of day now meant their zero hour,
They still were full of banter as they manned
The landing craft the davits eased away
And headed for the strangely silent shore,
And when a raider with a boyish voice
Sang out, "We'll knock von Runstedt for a loop!"
A laugh went round the forward-looking ranks.

Hugh Bidwell, huddled in his steel-sheathed barge,
Watched close across the early morning mist
The shadowy coast of France. He knew by now
They were to land along that curving shore
And after taking Tourville, storm Dieppe,
Dieppe, the town of ease, the idling place
Of summer crowds who once could laugh and sing
Along their wide and sun-lit Esplanade.
The raiders were to blast a gateway for
The clumsy tanks, and then go edging on
Through park and square and hidden pill-box traps,
Destroying what they could, and feeling out
The German strength behind the wooded hills.

If Hugh, with dark-webbed helmet slung askew,
Was glad of action after idleness,
He reaped a greater joy in seeing that
The man beside him was Bateese Courteau,
Good old Bateese, who was not old in years,
Bateese the cool and eagle-eyed young Cree
With whom he often ranged the prairie sloughs
Where every gun-bark meant a canvasback,
And now the keenest marksman of the Corps,
A cougar in worn khaki, set to kill,
A lean and stealthy-footed mountain lion
Of muscled strength and *métis* craftiness,
Who gave a wolf-howl as the ramp came down
And was the first to cross the pebbled beach

And snake his way up through the coils of wire
And creep along the low-walled Esplanade
And crouch and wait and take his casual shot
At waiting foes that he alone could see.

Hugh followed close behind, unconscious of
The chatter of machine guns from the cliffs.
For this, he murmured to himself, is life.
This is the thing they all had waited for.
He faced their bullets with no sense of fear,
Dodging from wall to wall and shooting when
A moving helmet showed between the leaves,
And flattening out beside his half-breed friend
When mortar shells made holes too close to him.

And still Hugh had no fear. Others might die,
But a hidden voice in his exultant heart
Kept telling him that he was different,
A man apart, a lad who loved this world,
Who in some devious way would yet pull through
And see again the white-cliffed English shore,
The fog-draped Banks, the hills of Canada,
And know once more the faces and the friends
Who watched to see their heroes marching home.

"You tak' beeg chance," Bateese called out to him;
But Hugh still faced the spitting guns and laughed.

"The bullet with my name, Bateese, has not
Been made. Their bombs may blow these walls to bits,
But they can't and won't touch me. That much I know!"

And during those hot hours of turbulence
His words were true enough. The German tanks
Rolled up in force and held the raiders back;
The Teuton planes came swarming through the sky
And scattered death along the wavering line;
And from their inland camps by truck and train
Reserves were hurried in and heavier guns
Came rumbling through the hills—and hell broke loose.

The crouched Commandos, with their lighter arms,
Could not withstand that onslaught. Foot by foot
They fought their rear-guard action, draped in smoke
That misted sea and shore and shell-torn town.

The order came to fall back to the boats,
But at the gun-swept beach no boats were there.
Yet still the raiders fought and frantically
Held back the grey-clad hordes surrounding them,
And waited for the boats, and gathered up
Their wounded, and still waited for the boats.

"We're going to face a second Dunkirk here,"
Growled out a colonel with a bandaged thigh,
"But give 'em hell, boys, to the bitter end!"

If hell was given, hell was still received;
The sloping sand was darkened with the dead.
Bateese, behind a huddled barricade
Of bloodied bodies piled together, sniped
At every foolish Hun who showed his face
And Hugh beside him answered shot for shot,
Until a cheer went up and word went round
The boats were seen, the boats were on their way!

But still the rain of lead beat back and forth.
Bateese, shot through the ankle, was caught up
In Hugh's quick arms and carried to the beach
Where with his belt he strapped the broken bones
And puffed the cigarette Hugh gave to him.
The men swarmed out about the landing craft
And clung to drooping ropes or climbed aboard.
A group of prisoners were herded close
And ushered sullen through the opened ramps.
But from the hills still shrilled the flailing shells
And Focke-Wulf's swung low above the waves
And bombed the harried stragglers in the sea,
Until the rising tide was red with blood.

Hugh waded out and struggled up the ropes
And tumbled panting on the sodden plates
Of the barge that moved so slowly out to sea
Where ghostlike in a drifting haze of smoke
Companion craft surged through the rain of shells

That withered with the slow-receding shore
And battle-wearied men could breathe again.
But as they breathed in that grim nonchalance
Of hope foregone and helpless weariness
The harrying planes weaved hawklike over them
And banked and rose and met the challenge of
The Spitfires swarming from the English coast.
The upper air became a shifting maze
Of engined anger and the tranquil blue
Blossomed from time to time with parachutes
That wafled down and met the deeper blue
Until the homeward riffling waves were buoyed
With tossing rubber dinghies, mile by mile,
As Kentish youth and comrade Rhenish youth,
Made kindred by their too Icarian wings,
Looked up at all the azure of the sky
And battled for the blessed right to breathe.

“There’ll be no glory in this raid,” said Hugh
To stony-eyed Bateese, who squatted close
Beside him on blood-clotted plates of steel.
“We’ve lost three thousand men and only got
This bunch of German swine to pay for it!”
His laugh was mirthless as he looked at them.
“But what I said, Bateese, sure stands the truth:
These bastards couldn’t get me!”

At those words

A grey-faced German captive, quick as thought,
Snatched up a pistol from a sergeant’s belt
And, gasping with blind hatred, levelled it
At Hugh—at Hugh whose laugh was smothered in
The louder sound that sent the bullet home
And left a wonder in his laughing eyes.
He staggered back and clutched his tunic, red
With gushing blood, and fell beside Bateese,
Who with a grunt whipped out his raider’s knife
And plunged it hilt-deep through the faded grey
That sheathed an emptying heart; then with a smile
Of snakelike Indian indifference
Drew out the blade, and wiped away the gore,
And as Hugh’s writhing body washed with red
Grew motionless and all his world went out,
Bateese caught up the grey-clad killer of
His boyhood friend, and with a second smile
Threw that blind shell of hatred overboard
And watched it float away, face downward, on the sea.

VIII

*The green mounds left at the lone portage,
The graves by the trekking wain,
Were strewn in the wake of their frontier fires
Where their dead were sown like grain.*

*And the gloom was starred with glimmering homes,
And the wastes with grain tamed gold,
And it fell in time, as it ever was,
That the New became the Old.*

*Its blood was that of the home-born sons,
And its hope, and brawn, was theirs,
But the Old World turns to its yesterday
While the New to the morrow fares.*

*Yet the child must age as the mother aged
And in time of her best must give:
By her outward-bound shall the old House stand,
By her lost shall the old Home live!*

There were so many wounded carried back,
So many mangled bodies under-deck,
As sleek destroyers and squat landing craft
Crept through the mine fields to the English coast
That in the early-wakened harbour-town
There was a call for ambulances when
The need could not be met.

A quiet-voiced girl
Swung up with her grey lorry and agreed
To take a load of wounded from the wharf
And get them safely to the hospital.

That promise and that hope were not fulfilled.
A Hunnish bomber, hanging on the heels
Of the harried ships that dodged and crept away
From the blood-stained sands and waters of Dieppe,
Swung lightly in above the cliffs of chalk
And dropped its egg and vanished in the blue
As the swinging ack-ack thundered back its thanks. . . .

And two hours later, in a white-walled room,
The young Scotch doctor with the ether cap
Leaned closer as his senior swung away
The magnet from his patient's sleeping face
And looked intently at a bit of steel
No bigger than his thumbnail.

"It's too bad,"
He muttered as he held the splinter up,
Remembering it was the fragment of
The shell that struck their startled Channel town
And left a young CWAC's crowded lorry-frame
A mass of twisted steel and ruddied flesh,
"Too bad a hell-sent little thing like that
Should do such mischief." With a deeper breath
He said, "But isn't that the way with war?"

"Is vision gone?" The younger man inquired.
The other bent above the sleeper's face
And shook his head. "It will be, son, before
We're through with her. That much I know."
The grave-faced Scot looked at the stricken girl,
Observing, "And she had such lovely eyes!"
Recalling at the moment that clear night
When he and she had talked of Canada
Beside the sea wall where the flak-guns stood.

"It won't, perhaps, make such a difference,"
Observed the man who saw too much of pain,
"Now that our whole mad planet has gone blind.
And she, I think, will take it in her stride,
For God knows she was brave in other things."

"Yes, she was of our best," the other said,
"And that grave smile of hers will sure be missed
By us when she is invalidated home."

"But where's her home?" the busy surgeon asked,
His tired eye on his watch. "And what's her name?"

The younger man gazed at the pallid face
And answered, "It's in western Canada.
And Lynn, Lynn Landsdale, is her name."

IX

*They showed us their ivied towers
And their tombs so grey with time,
Their storied walls where the lichens creep
And the stately roses climb.*

*But under their roses lay
Lost names that backward led,
Where under the sod so soft with rain
Reposed their statelier dead.*

*And we of that never race
That never has learned to reap
And barter and toil above the graves
Where our scattered fathers sleep—*

*We longed for our own far home
Where few dead heroes rest
And the long road laughs to the high white sun
And the glad hills greet the West—*

*And the carefree heart outspans
Where the camp-fired coulees wind
And the questing son of the open trail
Leaves all his dead behind.*

Clyde liked to watch the greening wheat grow tall
And the clean-floored earth between the shading stalks
Drink in the summer rain. He liked to watch
That sea of russet heads when lazy winds
Sent waves of shadow through the deepening gold.
But even better, when the grain was cut,
He liked to scan the crowded avenues
Of yellow mounds that meant a heavy yield.

And heavy was his yield, that arduous year
Of toil and sweat, with only Freya's hands
To stook the sheaves his binder left behind.
But her bright figure made the widest field
A garden of contentment as they worked.
He loved the music that the binder made,
The singing of the drive-chains as the reel
Bent so persuasively the serried stems
Against the shutting knives, the pale gold stream
That flowed along its slatted riverbed,
The banded sheaves that filled the carrier
And tumbled out, to lie like shell-torn men
Mowed down and moveless on a battlefield—
For Clyde could not forget how overseas
His brother-men on cannon-blasted hills
Were mowing down the ranks of war-doomed men
As madly as his own four-horsed machine
Was cutting down its destined ranks of grain—
And the Four Horses of that darker field
Were trampling with apocalyptic hooves
The hope and happiness of half the world.

But when Clyde's sombre gaze was fastened on
Blonde Freya toiling with the sheaves, less blonde
Than her own sun-bleached hair, a sense of peace,
And something more than peace, stole through his heart.
She was so sure, so strong, so competent,
As with quick hands she caught the bundles up,
Swung heads together, wider butts apart,
And with a downward movement anchored them
Firm on the earth in steepled tents of straw
Round which the leaning sister-tents were placed
And crowned with flattened sheaves to turn the rain,
And, slowly curing in the autumn sun,
Stand ready for the nomad threshing gang.

And Clyde, impatient for a reckoning
Of all his season's work, contrived to have
The threshers come as early as they could.
The lurching engine and the water tank,
The separator and the red caboose
Came crawling in before the break of day,
To turn the quiet fields into a place
Of tumult, while a placid Freya baked
And fried and roasted and made ready for

The hungry men with hillocks of hot food,
The mounting sun looked down on busy groups
About the steaming engine gorged with straw,
The swaying belt that shimmered as it went,
The bundle-teams that loomed like moving towers
Across the morning light, and lumbered in
Along the stubbled fields and circled close
Beside the separator with its jaws
Of whirring steel that drank the thick sheaves down
And made an arching waterfall of chaff
And straw blown from the stacker's throat
Where dust and clamour reigned.

But from the dust

And roar and rattle of machinery
Emerged the final glad reward of toil
And thought and struggle with the patient earth,
Emerged the ceaseless flow of kernelled gold
Into the waiting bins.

The outfit boss

Caught up a handful of the running wheat
And studied it with narrowed expert eyes.
"You've got a yield of Northern Number One
That'll leave those Buckhorn buyers sitting up!"
A swart spike-pitcher from his wagon said:
"What's more, my friend, as I've just figured it
She's running over fifty bushels to
The acre, or I'll eat this hat o' mine!"

Those words were wine to Clyde. And later, when
The threshing gang moved on to other farms
And the star-hung prairie rim was beacons with
The fires of burning straw, Clyde figured up
His season's crop and what it ought to bring,
While Freya sat beside him, busy with
Her sewing where the lamplight fell across
The braided yellow hair that crowned her head.
He told her of his yield. And she looked up
With her moon-misty placid smile and said:
"Someday, I think, you will be what they call
The Wheat King of this country."

And he smiled

And answered: "Far, my Freya, from a king;
But all the waste and carnage overseas
And all the blindness in that older world
You left behind has sent the price of wheat
So high that lank clothopper oafs like us
Can hold our heads above the water now.
And if the cards fall as they ought to fall
I'd like, next season, to extend my line
And swing a section of that Nelson ranch
Where everything," he said, "is going to seed."

He saw how Freya put her sewing down
And stared off into space. And when he asked
Just what she might be thinking, heard her say:
"I wonder where poor Freya will be then?"
He saw the sadness in her fading smile,
The sadness in the eyes that met his own,
Then turned away.

And suddenly he cried:

"You are my partner, Freya, on this farm
That without you would be an empty waste,
And we'll go on as partners to the end."

"We may be partners in the fields," she said,
"But that is all. And even it must end.
There is that girl in England has your heart
And someday she'll be coming back for you."

She saw the look that crept into his face,
The hardened lines about his mouth, and knew
She had in some way probed an open wound.

"That girl," he said, "is nothing in my life,
And we'll not talk of her."

"I'm sorry," said

The cherried lips that quickly lost their smile.
And Freya turned and took her sewing up,
While Clyde, for clouded reasons all his own,

Felt suddenly alone in time and space,
Alone in mist and dust and treadmill days
With little left to fight and struggle for.
When his dour eyes fell on the flaxen hair
Of Freya, half in shadow, half in light,
It seemed the only softness in his life.

And Freya, at his silence, turned and saw
The anguish on his face, and quietly crossed
To where he sat and placed a pitying hand
On his tensed shoulder as her own mild eyes
Grew softer with a look of sympathy
That seemed quite new to them.

And there she groped

For words that were beyond her Norse-trained tongue,
For all she murmured was: "I think I know."
Clyde felt her rough and hardened hand stroke back
His sun-cripsed mat of hair, remembering
It was the first small sign of tenderness
That he had ever known to come from her,
While she reminded him, "You have your wheat——"
As though a crop was everything in life.

"What good are bins of wheat, when better things
Are blown away like prairie dust?" he said.

"You have your land," the stubborn lips maintained,
"The land that brings the grain that makes the bread
That feeds the world."

Her smiling face grew hard.

"And we who have gone hungry, day by day,
Long month by month, know what mere eating means."

He looked at her in wonder, conscious that
This was the first time all the hidden bars
Went down between his lonely heart and hers.
He long had felt secure behind the thought
That she had always been so like a man,
So hard and strong and patient in her work;
Yet under that grim shell was womanhood,
Warm womanhood, abundant and alive
And made for loving.

Sudden hunger brought

His arms about her and he drew her down
And held her close, and pressed unhappy lips
Upon the lips that were so red and warm
And felt the softness of a rounded breast
Against his heart—and knew a sense of loss
When Freya so abruptly drew away.

"No; if you have not love for me we must
Not do these things," she said in quiet reproof.

"But we are here together, man and woman,
And life still owes us something," Clyde replied.
But Freya moved her head half sorrowfully
From side to side and, smiling, answered him:
"You do not love me."

Clyde then turned to her

And once more caught her in his arms and said:
"But that is something I can learn to do,
For you are wonderful, and we are lost
Here on the lonely frontier of the world
And that warm mouth of yours both sets my blood
On fire and brings a peace about my heart."

"Then it is best," the full red lips replied,
"That I go off to other farms before
We do some foolish thing that is not right."
And she went out into the star-lit night and leaned
Against the timbers of the dark corral,
And the room without her seemed an empty place.

Clyde in the lamp-lit silence paced the floor
And tried to picture life with Freya gone.
She was not of his race, or of his kind,
And the words that passed between them would be few,
But that superbness of blonde flesh and bone
And bodily magnificence should be
Enough for any man.

The mounting thought

Of empty days and nights without her sent

A darker pang of desolation through
His love-starved heart.

That surge of solitude
Was like a wave that swept him through the door,
Across the trodden yard, and past the pens,
To Freya standing by the dark corral.

"You must not leave me, Freya!" he cried out
As he took her hand and drew her body close.
"I need you here. And if it must be done,
We may as well live on as man and wife."

"That means you marry me?" she quietly asked,
And in the starlight when he said it did
A woman's smile of triumph played about
The full red lips he found and kissed again.

"I think someday I'll maybe make you learn
To love me just a little," Freya said,
And held him closer in her ample arms
And wondered why no answer came from him.

Before the week was over, side by side,
They drove to Buckhorn on a load of grain
And there were married in the parsonage
Beside the wooden church. And as they dined
In Buckhorn's unresplendent eating place
The radio above the bar announced:

"At Stalingrad the German troops advanced
In hand-to-hand encounters in the street. . . .
And at Bordeaux one hundred patriots
Were executed in reprisal for
Their anti-Nazi acts. . . . The Government
Regretfully discloses that the troops
From Canada that landed at Dieppe,
While fighting bravely, suffered heavy loss;
Almost four thousand of our stalwart sons
Must now be written down as casualties. . . ."

Clyde's face grew shadowed as the voice droned on.
"I think," he said, "we should be trekking home."

And homeward in the paling autumn light
They drove in mingled happiness and gloom
And milked their wakened cows and fed their stock;
And with their devious farm chores finished up
Clyde put the lantern out, and wound the clock,
And, peering into Freya's placid eyes,
Explained, with quickened pulse beats, how they two
Would sleep together in the double bed
No one had slept in since his mother died.

X

*For only a day it bloomed,
And at dusk lay dead,
Through the night that its breath perfumed
Its spirit fled.*

*Yet the rock by the rose's side
Through the long years lay,
While the rose swung bright and died
In a single day.*

*And loved was the withering rose,
But the flawless stone,
Round which no grave could close,
No love had known.*

The clock that ticked away his crowded hours,
His harried days, his overlonely nights
That were, at last, to lose their loneliness,
Was still in Clyde's brown hand when suddenly
A sound broke through the silence.

And the sound
Was that of someone knocking at his door.
He knew that Freya and her lamp had gone
Up to the room that held the double bed,
And a thin impatience touched him as he groped
His dark way to the door, and opened it—
To find Lynn's mother standing there alone.
And when he led her to the lighted room
He saw, with sudden coldness in his blood,
How tense and trouble-laden was the face
Of his late visitor.

"I had to come."
She cried out brokenly, confronting him.
"I had to come, Clyde, for I know how close
You were to Lynn, how you have loved my girl,
My poor lost girl!"

The sound of that bleak voice
Brought a sudden tightness close about his heart.
"She is not dead?" he questioned, standing back
And staring at the face so touched with pain.
"No, no—she is not dead. But all her days
My girl will never see again."

Those words
Were muffled in the mother's faltering sob.
"She has been blinded by a German shell,
And when they send her back she'll never see
Her kith and kin, or how the roses hang
About that bush you gave her long ago,
Or how the sunlight falls across the wheat
Or how the prairie lilies star the sod."

The white-faced woman's voice took on
A note of protest when she spoke again.
"That is not all. This war brings bitter news
To us who wait at home. . . . Hugh has been killed,
Killed in the fighting at the Dieppe Raid.
He died, the chaplain of his corps writes back,
Confronting frightful odds and fighting on
Until his strength was gone, then forth to God
He went a hero, a hero to the end."

Clyde crossed the room and at the window sill
Stood staring out across the star-lit land
That had engrossed his thoughts while other lives
Were being mowed down like sheaves, for freedom's sake.
Lynn blind! Lynn blind! And Hugh killed at the front!

He heard, as through a mist, the mother's voice
Proclaiming how the Red Cross was to make
Inquiries as to where Lynn had been sent
And when she could be coming home again.
And through the fog that seemed to fill the room
He heard the broken mother murmur: "Now
I must go back!"

He found and took her hand
And led her slowly to the waiting car
Where all the stumbling words of sympathy

He spoke seemed more than wasted on the air.

And with a heavy heart he wandered back
To his own waiting roof, the waiting bed,
And in the midnight silence thought about
The past, and how life's threads were tangled up
By Fate, who, being blind, so blindly weaves.

XI

*It stands unwon though proudly wooed,
A pale star in the night
That through the dusk and solitude
Still lures and leads to light.*

*But baffled, bruised, and torn of soul,
We learn through time and tears
It was the struggle, not the goal,
Made rich our emptier years.*

*For as we win, we strangely lose,
And as we lose, we win,
And white the temple stands for those
Who have not entered in.*

Clyde knew that Lynn was home.

Yet day by day

He wondered at his strange unwillingness
To meet her face to face. When finally
She showed herself the braver of the two
And sent for him, he crossed the fields on foot
And swung the too-familiar willow gate
And crossed the garden where the poplars stood
In towers of gold, and Lynn sat reading Braille
With the slanting autumn sunlight on her hair.
She smiled a little when she heard his voice
And turned and groped for his toil-hardened hand
And held it for a moment, though the words
That passed between them seemed quite meaningless
To the far from happy Clyde. He saw the cloud
That crept across her half-averted face,
And knew too well there were so many things
That must be left behind the doors of Time,
So many graves that overcareless feet
Must not be treading on.

"I hope," Lynn said
As a leaf of gold fell on her open book,
"That you are happy, Clyde."

A silence grew
Between them as he groped for tempering words
To answer, when the answer was not truth.
He could not tell her how his empty heart
Still ached for her, accepting in its need
The second-best where she had long stood first,
How star and moon and all earth's wonderment
Still lay in that soft face where blindness dwelt.

"Oh yes, I am quite happy," he replied
With his amending laugh. "As happy as
The gods allow in this war-troubled world.
And as a man gets on he learns to ask
For less than when he walked with April dreams."

She gave some thought to that and quietly said:
"But you still have your land, the land you love;
And I've just heard you've got a section more
To break and seed and bring you happiness."

She waited, smiling, for some word from him,
But his gaze was on the Rockies tinged with rose.
A cold wind stirred the poplars where the sun
Threw longer shadows on the faded turf.

"These autumn days grow chilly," Lynn observed,
"And now I must go in."

And Clyde went back
To his own acres sad with autumn light,
And from an umber furrow lifted up
A handful of dark soil.

He stared at it
And wondered why the love of woman still
Should trouble men who had their land to love
And pondered why a world that ached for peace
Should stumble down the blood-soaked paths of hate
And blindly seek their shadowed victories.

L'Envoi

*Over the farmlands sweet with grain,
Where once the shells plunged deep,
How blithe the poppies blow again,
How well the orchards sleep.*

*Over the gleaners floats and sings
The lark to the falling sun,
Over the graves of far-off things
And old wars lost and won.*

*And over the hills where long ago
Now-mouldering warriors met
How green the peaceful vineyards grow,
How well the fields forget!*

Finis

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.
Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.
A cover was created for this eBook.

[The end of *Shadowed Victory*, by Arthur Stringer.]