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Title: They are Returning

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Date of first publication: 1945

Edition used as base for this ebook: Toronto: Macmillan, 1945 [first edition]

Date first posted: 10 March 2016

Date last updated: March 16, 2016

Faded Page ebook#20160313

This ebook was produced by Al Haines

Publisher's Note:

As part of the conversion of the book to its new digital format, we have made certain minor adjustments in its layout.

THEY ARE RETURNING

E. J. PRATT

TORONTO
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
OF CANADA LIMITED
1945

PRINTED IN CANADA
GILCHRIST-WRIGHT LIMITED
TORONTO

THEY ARE RETURNING

Cease Fire! Again the order
Has closed the campaigns of the Western world.
The bugles are silent: the flags are furled.
Only the requiems remain to be sung
And the knells rung
Over the dust of Europe.
And with the order
Ceased, too, those all but animate forms,
Mechanic myths of man's creative act
Transfigured into fact,
Endowed with perfect suicidal skill,
With power to fight unbleeding, yet to kill—
The robots that had changed tail-winds
To head-on storms,
Had coasted past the Spitfires
And given the speed of sound a run—
These now to the last one
Have fallen from their lightning thoroughfares,
Or else spooked by the Lancasters
Were caught and smoked out from their Calais lairs.

Ceased, too, the official bulletin,
"With deep regrets" sent to the next-of-kin,
The papers' daily pyramid of losses,

The mass production of the wooden crosses—
The story of the unreturning.
These put their bodies
Between us and the flaming skies,
Between us and a night as foul
As ever fell on European eyes,
And more incredible
Than any picture lore of fables;
Between us and a fear that tore apart
The deepest instincts of the family ties,
The Nazi deformation of the heart,
The Quisling poison at the household tables,
The son's metallic stare, the start
At the troopers' rap upon the door,
The bullet and the blood upon the floor,
The camps, the pestilential breath
That caught the thousands in the vans of death;
Between us and the regimental boot
Upon our altars, the enforced salute,
The lie at the lips, the threat
Of the unknown that kills the mind
Before the body husk, the silhouette
Of helmets on the window-blind,
The laboratory shadow which combined
Cunning of science, terror of the brute,
And running back along the human tree,
Could come up stemming from a simian root
To learn how to congeal an infamy
Like Buchenwald or Maidanek or Lidice—
Between us and all that they placed their whole
Economy of body and of soul.
We have known blood to run
Like this before—blood of father, blood of son,
And we had read
That out of blood from hands and feet and side
A faith once came to birth
And found its test of worth,
Or were we so misled
And so unprofited,
That in the self-same stream the faith has died,
Lost in the periodic ebb and flow
That left an aftermath upon the earth
Of terror, greed and woe?
And we have seen the way the sons of men
Have passed through Moloch but to pass again
Through Mammon—yet once more
Out of the crumpled gunpits of a War,
Faced with the sight of an entire
Continent afire,
We dare in this last phase of the eclipse
To place the morning trumpets to our lips.

They are returning.

Was it five years ago or yesterday
They spent their leisured hours at play,
Were walking through the turnstiles
To watch their heroes of the diamond smash
Their homers, or a bantam flash
Hang his opponent on the ropes? The world
Was focused in the hit, the plate, the curled
Pitch, in the yards won in the scrimmage, in the sight
Of a puck flying through the posts.
Then overnight
The game was on another field
With sacrificial gain and yield,
The hedgerow inches grilling into yards
Against the wire and the shrapnel shards.
Five years ago, an age,
Or yesterday,
That with heads strained,
Ears cocked, eyes on the sky,
These boys were being trained
To listen to the hum, identify
By cut of wing, tail, fuselage,
The models of the aeroplanes?
So soon they found themselves with wings,
And mingling in free comradeship with star
And cloud and eagles, while far
Below in microscopic spaces
Were creeping things
Like slugs and motor-cars and trains.

So short a time,
That women too should take their places,
Behind the steering wheel,
In front of the micrometer
Spinning threads as fine as gossamer
For the rifle mountings,
Guiding turret lathes, or welding plates,
Spark-testing steel,
Assembling fuses, wires in cables, grinding
Lenses and prisms, or finding
The death-range near the Lines in Italy
Where, standing by a soldier's bed,
They could direct the pale-gold
Drip of the plasma or the *mould*
Into a median vein and see
It re-enact
The Resurrection from the Dead.

What brought the change?
The rumble of the panzers into Poland,
The stories of the camps, the latest tale
Of the Gestapo, the *Athenia*, Rotterdam,
That ominous thrust of the arrow-diagram
Upon the maps, Dunkirk, and the fall
Of Paris, following the ram

Of the tanks against the civilian jam
Upon the roads—(Of what avail
The Lines against those fleet
Arrows now east and south
Towards Yugo-Slavia, Greece and Crete?)
Was it but one of these, or all,
The quick contagion of a bugle call,
The highest note in the scale
Of Churchill's voice—"We shall not fail"?
Or was it something more
That made those children of the first World War,
Scarce come to their majority,
Those heirs of Vimy and of Passchendaele,
Gather around to read a legacy
And guard it to the last terms of the will,
Almost, it seemed to us, before
Their fathers' blood was dry upon the codicil?

And so they went, those boys turned into men.

One who had read of ancient Northern France,
And sketched the district known as Normandy,
Knew Carentan, Saint Lô, Rouen, Crécy,
As points within a pageant of Romance,
Of Anglo-Gallic victory and defeat,
Where longbows with their grey-goose feathers beat
The crossbows—who knew Bayeux
And its two hundred feet of tapestry
Picturing the record of the Conqueror—
Could he have guessed the fateful chance
That led his steps into an Abbey nave
Where, with survivors of a battered corps,
He would, with dust of Caen upon his tunic,
Survey the Norman's grave?

One who had followed in a Latin book
The story of the Second Punic War,
Of Hannibal's descent, and took
As casual names—the Arno, Upper Tiber,
Arezzo and Cassino,—
Could he,
Foretell that in two years or three
He would be fighting
On the Tyrrhenian shore,
Or dying at the beach of Trasimeno?

And those whose summer hands had known
Only the oars and paddles on a bay,
The rigging of a catboat or a smack,
Turned into leading seamen,
Stemming the winter in Atlantic waters
On the *Swansea* or the *Chilliwack*,
Or, in the *Skeena-Athabaskan* way,
Putting the hulls as buffers
Between the convoy and the pack.

And to those youngsters out of school
Came honours higher
Than that to which ambition could aspire,
Ribbons and bars and crosses,
In that proud hour of their investiture,
For diving with their Typhoon rocket-fire
Upon the panthers at Esquay,
Pinpointing targets on the Ruhr,
For chasing Messerschmitts,
Conceding odds of three to one,
Under the Malta sun,
Or driving through the North Sea winds to seal
The exits to the artery of Kiel.
They have met dangers that outfaced
Homeric myths, gone journeys that outpaced
The farthest-leagued Ulyssean strides.
For they have lodged
In foreign lands with winds and tides
And mountain pines;
Set up their tents under the Apennines;
Or, clothed in ice, were tossed
In the storm pockets of the Himalayas;
Climbed over Burma; crossed
The Irrawady; entered Kiska; took the raw
North air on the deck of the *Iroquois*;
Exchanged the *Scharnhorst's* greetings; saw
Murmansk; explored the reaches
Of Scandinavian capes and Arctic seas;
Came back; chugged through the Channel fogs to draw
Around Gibraltar to Calabrian beaches
Fresh lines upon the world's geographies.

They are returning.

No dole or bread line must await those hands
That once had clawed at the Ortona sands,
Or held that five-day bridgehead at the Scheldt,
Those feet that raced to join
The *Haida* and *Assiniboine*.
The pilots of the aeroplanes,
Who made the sky their thoroughfare,
Must breathe on earth an unpolluted air
And take the sunlight through the slumless panes,
Their young hearts washed by a great cause
Acclaimed at the world's barricades.
Those craftsmen of the arts of flying,
Those foremen of the modes of dying—
They shall come back to new crusades,
To set the red pine to the whirring blades
Along the sky lanes for the marts of peace,
To take the produce of their toil, to say
To the machine, the drills and cranes,
The dynamos and lathes—*Obey!*
To claim the right to reap the autumn stores

And the shared yield of the earth's veins,
Masters, not servants, of pre-Cambrian ores,
To own their birthright as the free
Citizens of earth and sky and sea.

They are returning

To write a chapter on the history of beaches.
To trace a line of Trojan spray
Against the dawn of a Norman day;
To draw the eyes that never looked on death,
The frigid muscles and the cancelled breath;
To coin the verb and seize the noun
For the first stare as the bow doors opened
And the ramp went down.

To sing the songs for those whose names
Were left unread
In the citations of the hour—
The thousands of unsung amorphous dead,
The sailors of the sweeper-craft,
The ratings of the foc's'les,
The stokers in the holds for whom no bells
Tolled when they left their unberibboned toil
Only to try their chances on a raft,
Or plunge beneath the tanker's blazing oil.

To squeeze the crimson from a tube
And mix it with a natural green,
To show how mortars, rockets, tanks,
Could splash the khaki of the ranks—
To paint that scene
On a broken wave of live June corn
Somewhere within the fields between
The Odon and the Orne.
To find the way the colour drains
Out of the paratroopers' veins,
The moment at the dropping zone; to catch
The flicker of the pulses at the hatch
Above a rendezvous that lay
Behind the German rim at Carpiquet.

To write a ballad on a crew of eight
In a patrolling Canso flying-boat,
Measure the stresses to relate
The curves, the dive, the way they came,
Passed through the storm of the U-boat flak,
With starboard engine dead and wings aflame,
And then came back
To sink her; tell the hours of drift and wait
Of the rubber dinghy with her double freight.

They shall come back to build in stubborn rhyme,
Out of Laurentian rock and Norman lime,
Memorial towers Canadian

Across a continental span;
To mix a mortar that shall never crumble
Before the blasts of war or wear of time.
To native tunes
They shall arrange the old-world runes,
Fingering those names keyed to the sound of shells
Above the Benedictine cells—
Foggia, Adriatic, and Ancona,
Ceprano, Florence, Capua, Ortona—
And make them ring new notes in Western steeples.
And from those tonic syllables,
Dieppe, Authie, Falaise, and Carpiquet,
Kleve, Emmerich, Antwerp and Groningen,
They shall learn how to wind
Their souls into the reeds and strings
To reach their own *Eroicas*, and find
The *Chorals*, *Passions*, *Pathétiques*,
To hymn their Iliad voyagings.

[End of *They are Returning*, by E. J. Pratt]