

CAN GRANDE'S CASTLE

BY
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GUNS AS KEYS: AND THE GREAT GATE SWINGS

HEDGE ISLAND

THE BRONZE HORSES

I turn the page and read...

...

*The heavy musty air, the black desks,
The bent heads and the rustling noises*

In the great dome

Vanish...

And

*The sun hangs in the cobalt-blue sky,
The boat drifts over the lake shallows,
The fishes skim like umber shades through the
undulating weeds,*

The oleanders drop their rosy petals on the lawns,

And the swallows dive and swirl and whistle

About the cleft battlements of Can Grande's castle..."

Richard Aldington. "AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM."

PREFACE

The four poems in this book are more closely related to one another than may at first appear. They all owe their existence to the war, for I suppose that, had there been no war, I should never have thought of them. They are scarcely war poems, in the strict sense of the word, nor are they allegories in which the present is made to masquerade as the past. Rather, they are the result of a vision thrown suddenly back upon remote events to explain a strange and terrible reality. "Explain" is hardly the word, for to explain the subtle causes which force men, once in so often, to attempt to break the civilization they have been at pains to rear, and so oblige other, saner, men to oppose them, is scarcely the province of poetry. Poetry works more deviously, but perhaps not less conclusively.

It has frequently been asserted that an artist lives apart, that he must withdraw himself from events and be somehow above and beyond them. To a certain degree this is true, as withdrawal is usually an inherent quality of his nature, but to seek such a withdrawal is both ridiculous and frustrating. For an artist to shut himself up in the proverbial "ivory tower" and never look out of the window is merely a tacit admission that it is his ancestors, not he, who possess the faculty of creation. This is the real decadence: to see through the eyes of dead men. Yet to-day can never be adequately expressed, largely because we are a part of it and only a part. For that reason one is flung backwards to a time which is not thrown out of proportion by any personal experience, and which on that very account lies extended in something like its proper perspective.

Circumstances beget an interest in like circumstances, and a poet, suddenly finding himself in the midst of war, turns naturally to the experiences of other men in other wars. He discovers something which has always hitherto struck him as preposterous, that life goes on in spite of war. That war itself is an expression of life, a barbaric expression on one side calling for an heroic expression on the other. It is as if a door in his brain crashed open and he looked into a distance of which he had heard but never before seen. History has become life, and he stands aghast and exhilarated before it.

That is why I have chosen Mr. Aldington's poem as a motto to this book. For it is obvious that I cannot have experienced what I have here written. I must have got it from books. But, living now, in the midst of events greater than these, the books have become reality to me in a way that they never could have become before, and the stories I have dug out of dusty volumes seem as actual as my own existence. I hope that a little of this vividness may have got into the poems themselves, and so may reach my readers. Perhaps it has been an impossible task, I can only say that I was compelled to attempt it.

The poems are written in "polyphonic prose," a form which has proved a stumbling-block to many people. "Polyphonic prose" is perhaps a misleading title, as it tends to make the layman think that this is a prose form. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The word "prose" in its title simply refers to the manner in which the words are printed; "polyphonic"—many-voiced—giving the real key. "Polyphonic prose" is the freest, the most elastic, of all forms, for it follows at will any, and all, of the rules which guide other forms. Metrical verse has one set of laws, cadenced verse another; "polyphonic prose" can go from one to the other in the same poem

with no sense of incongruity. Its only touchstone is the taste and feeling of its author.

Yet, like all other artistic forms, it has certain fundamental principles, and the chief of these is an insistence on the absolute adequacy of the manner of a passage to the thought it embodies. Taste is therefore its determining factor; taste and a rhythmic ear.

In the preface to "Sword Blades and Poppy Seed," I stated that I had found the idea of the form in the works of the French poet, M. Paul Fort. But in adapting it for use in English I was obliged to make so many changes that it may now be considered as practically a new form. The greatest of these changes was in the matter of rhythm. M. Fort's practice consists, almost entirely, of regular verse passages interspersed with regular prose passages. But a hint in one of his poems led me to believe that a closer blending of the two types was desirable, and here at the very outset I met with a difficulty. Every form of art must have a base; to depart satisfactorily from a rhythm it is first necessary to have it. M. Fort found this basic rhythm in the alexandrine. But the rhythm of the alexandrine is not one of the basic rhythms to an English ear. Altered from syllables to accent, it becomes light, even frivolous, in texture. There appeared to be only one basic rhythm for English serious verse: iambic pentameter, which, either rhymed as in the "heroic couplet" or unrhymed as in "blank verse," seems the chief foundation of English metre. It is so heavy and so marked, however, that it is a difficult rhythm to depart from and go back to; therefore I at once discarded it for my purpose.

Putting aside one rhythm of English prosody after another, I finally decided to base my form upon the long, flowing cadence of oratorical prose. The variations permitted to this cadence enable

the poet to change the more readily into those of *vers libre*, or even to take the regular beat of metre, should such a marked time seem advisable. It is, of course, important that such changes should appear as not only adequate but necessary when the poem is read aloud. And so I have found it. However puzzled a reader may be in trying to apprehend with the eye a prose which is certainly not prose, I have never noticed that an audience experiences the slightest confusion in hearing a "polyphonic prose" poem read aloud. I admit that the typographical arrangement of this form is far from perfect, but I have not as yet been able to hit upon a better. As all printing is a mere matter of convention, however, I hope that people will soon learn to read it with no more difficulty than a musician knows in reading a musical score.

So much for the vexed question of rhythm. Others of the many voices of "polyphonic prose" are rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and return. Rhyme is employed to give a richness of effect, to heighten the musical feeling of a passage, but it is employed in a different way from that usual in metrical verse. For, although the poet may, indeed must, employ rhyme, it is not done always, nor, for the most part, regularly. In other words, the rhymes should seldom come at the ends of the cadences, unless such an effect be especially desired. This use of rhyme has been another difficulty to readers. Seeing rhymes, their minds have been compelled by their seeming strangeness to pull them, Jack-Horner-like, out of the text and unduly notice them, to the detriment of the passage in which they are embedded. Hearing them read without stress, they pass unobserved, merely adding their quota of tonal colour to the whole.

Return in "polyphonic prose" is usually achieved by the recurrence of a dominant thought or image, coming in irregularly

and in varying words, but still giving the spherical effect which I have frequently spoken of as imperative in all poetry.

It will be seen, therefore, that "polyphonic prose" is, in a sense, an orchestral form. Its tone is not merely single and melodic as is that of *vers libre*, for instance, but contrapuntal and various. I have analyzed it here with some care because, as all the poems in this volume are written in it, some knowledge of how to approach it is necessary if one is to understand them. I trust, however, that my readers will speedily forget matters of technique on turning to the poems themselves.

One thing more I wish to say in regard to "Guns as Keys: and the Great Gate Swings." I should be exceedingly sorry if any part of this poem were misunderstood, and so construed into an expression of discourtesy toward Japan. No such idea entered my mind in writing it; in fact, the Japanese sections in the first part were intended to convey quite the opposite meaning. I wanted to place in juxtaposition the delicacy and artistic clarity of Japan and the artistic ignorance and gallant self-confidence of America. Of course, each country must be supposed to have the faults of its virtues; if, therefore, I have also opposed Oriental craft to Occidental bluff, I must beg indulgence.

I have tried to give a picture of two races at a moment when they were brought in contact for the first time. Which of them has gained most by this meeting, it would be difficult to say. The two episodes in the "Postlude" are facts, but they can hardly epitomize the whole truth. Still they are striking, occurring as they did in the same year. I owe the scene of the drowning of the young student in the Kegon waterfall to the paper "Young Japan," by Seichi Naruse, which appeared in the "Seven Arts" for April, 1917. The

inscription on the tree I have copied word for word from Mr. Naruse's translation, and I wish here to express my thanks, not for his permission (as with a perfect disregard of morals, I never asked it), but for his beautiful rendering of the original Japanese. I trust that my appreciation will exonerate my theft.

AMY LOWELL.

BROOKLINE, MASS.

MAY 24, 1918.

SEA-BLUE AND BLOOD-RED

I

THE MEDITERRANEAN

Blue as the tip of a salvia blossom, the inverted cup of the sky arches over the sea. Up to meet it, in a flat band of glaring colour, rises the water. The sky is unspotted by clouds, but the sea is flecked with pink and white light shadows, and silver scintillations snip-snap over the tops of the waves.

Something moves along the horizon. A puff of wind blowing up the edges of the silver-blue sky? Clouds! Clouds! Great thunderheads marching along the skyline! No, by Jove! The sun shining on sails! Vessels, hull down, with only their tiers of canvas showing. Beautiful ballooning thunderheads dipping one after another below the blue band of the sea.

II

NAPLES

Red tiles, yellow stucco, layer on layer of windows, roofs, and balconies, Naples pushes up the hill away from the curving bay. A red, half-closed eye, Vesuvius watches and waits. All Naples prates of this and that, and runs about its little business, shouting, bawling, incessantly calling its wares. Fish frying, macaroni drying, seven feet piles of red and white brocoli, grapes heaped high with rosemary, sliced pomegranates dripping seeds, plucked and bleeding chickens, figs on spits, lemons in baskets, melons cut and

quartered nicely, "*Ah, che bella cosa!*" They even sell water, clear crystal water for a paul or two. And everything done to a hullabaloo. They jabber over cheese, they chatter over wine, they gabble at the corners in the bright sunshine. And piercing through the noise is the beggar-whine, always, like an undertone, the beggar-whine; and always the crimson, watching eye of Vesuvius.

Have you seen her—the Ambassadors? Ah, *Bellissima Creatura! Una Donna Kara!* She is fairer than the Blessed Virgin; and good! Never was such a soul in such a body! The role of her benefactions would stretch from here to Posilipo. And she loves the people, loves to go among them and speak to this one and that, and her apple-blossom face under the big blue hat works miracles like the Holy Images in the Churches.

In her great house with the red marble stairway, Lady Hamilton holds brilliant sway. From her boudoir windows she can see the bay, and on the left, hanging there, a flame in a cresset, the blood-red glare of Vesuvius staring at the clear blue air.

Blood-red on a night of stars, red like a wound, with lava scars. In the round wall-mirrors of her boudoir, is the blackness of the bay, the whiteness of a star, and the bleeding redness of the mountain's core. Nothing more. All night long, in the mirrors, nothing more. Black water, red stain, and above, a star with its silver rain.

Over the people, over the king, trip the little Ambassadorial feet; fleet and light as a pigeon's wing, they brush over the artists, the friars, the *abbés*, the Court. They bear her higher and higher at each step. Up and over the hearts of Naples goes the beautiful Lady Hamilton till she reaches even to the Queen; then rests in a

sheening, shimmering altitude, between earth and sky, high and floating as the red crater of Vesuvius. Buoyed up and sustained in a blood-red destiny, all on fire for the world to see.

Proud Lady Hamilton! Superb Lady Hamilton! Quivering, blood-swept, vivid Lady Hamilton! Your vigour is enough to awake the dead, as you tread the newly uncovered courtyards of Pompeii. There is a murmur all over the opera house when you enter your box. And your frocks! Jesu! What frocks! "India painting on wyte sattin!" And a new camlet shawl, all sea-blue and blood-red, in an intricate pattern, given by Sir William to help you do your marvellous "Attitudes." Incomparable actress! No theatre built is big enough to compass you. It takes a world; and centuries shall elbow each other aside to watch you act your part. Art, Emma, or heart?

The blood-red cone of Vesuvius glows in the night.

She sings "*Luce Bella*," and Naples cries "*Brava! Ancora!*" and claps its hands. She dances the tarantella, and poses before a screen with the red-blue shawl. It is the frescoes of Pompeii unfrozen; it is the fine-cut profiles of Sicilian coins; it is Apollo Belvedere himself—Goethe has said it. She wears a Turkish dress, and her face is sweet and lively as rippled water.

The lava-streams of Vesuvius descend as far as Portici. She climbs the peak of fire at midnight—five miles of flame. A blood-red mountain, seeping tears of blood. She skips over glowing ashes and laughs at the pale, faded moon, wan in the light of the red-hot lava. What a night! Spires and sparks of livid flame shooting into the black sky. Blood-red smears of fire; blood-red gashes, flashing her out against the smouldering mountain. A tossing fountain of

blood-red jets, it sets her hair flicking into the air like licking flamelets of a burning aureole. Blood-red is everywhere. She wears it as a halo and diadem. Emma, Emma Hamilton, Ambassadors of Great Britain to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

III ABOUKIR BAY, EGYPT

North-north-west, and a whole-sail breeze, ruffling up the larkspur-blue sea, breaking the tops of the waves into egg-white foam, shoving ripple after ripple of pale jade-green over the shoals of Aboukir Bay. Away to the East rolls in the sluggish water of old Nile. West and South—hot, yellow land. Ships at anchor. Thirteen ships flying the *tricolore*, and riding at ease in a patch of blue water inside a jade-green hem. What of them? Ah, fine ships! The *Orient*, one hundred and twenty guns, *Franklin*, *Tonnant*, each with eighty. Weighty metal to float on a patch of blue with a green hem. They ride stem to stern, in a long line, pointing the way to Aboukir Bay.

To the North are thunderheads, ballooning silver-white thunderheads rising up out of the horizon. The thunderheads draw steadily up into the blue-blossomed sky. A topgallant breeze pushes them rapidly over the white-specked water. One, two, six, ten, thirteen separate tiered clouds, and the wind sings loud in their shrouds and spars. The royals are furled, but the topgallantsails and topsails are full and straining. Thirteen white thunderheads bearing down on Aboukir Bay.

The Admiral is working the stump of his right arm; do not cross his hawse, I advise you.

"Youngster to the mast-head. What! Going without your glass, and be damned to you! Let me know what you see, immediately."

"The enemy fleet, Sir, at anchor in the bay."

"Bend on the signal to form in line of battle, Sir Ed'ard."

The bright wind straightens the signal pennants until they stand out rigid like boards.

"Captain Hood reports eleven fathoms, Sir, and shall he bear up and sound?"

"Signal Captain Hood to lead, sounding."

"By the mark ten! A quarter less nine! By the deep eight!"

Round to starboard swing the white thunderheads, the water of their bows washing over the green jade hem. An orange sunset steams in the shrouds, and glints upon the muzzles of the cannon in the open ports. The hammocks are down; the guns run out and primed; beside each is a pile of canister and grape; gunners are blowing on their matches; snatches of fife music drift down to the lower decks. In the cockpits, the surgeons are feeling the edges of knives and saws; men think of their wives and swear softly, spitting on their hands.

"Let go that anchor! By God, she hangs!"

Past the *Guerrier* slides the *Goliath*, but the anchor drops and stops her on the inner quarter of the *Conquérant*. The *Zealous* brings up on the bow of the *Guerrier*, the *Orion*, *Theseus*, *Audacious*, are all come to, inside the French ships.

The *Vanguard*, Admiral's pennant flying, is lying outside the *Spartiate*, distant only a pistol shot.

In a pattern like a country dance, each balanced justly by its neighbour, lightly, with no apparent labour, the ships slip into place, and lace a design of white sails and yellow yards on the purple, flowing water. Almighty Providence, what a day! Twenty-three ships in one small bay, and away to the Eastward, the water of old Nile rolling sluggishly between its sand-bars.

Seven hundred and forty guns open fire on the French fleet. The sun sinks into the purple-red water, its low, straight light playing gold on the slaughter. Yellow fire, shot with red, in wheat sheafs from the guns; and a racket and ripping which jerks the nerves, then stuns, until another broadside crashes the ears alive again. The men shine with soot and sweat, and slip in the blood which wets the deck.

The surgeons cut and cut, but men die steadily. It is heady work, this firing into ships not fifty feet distant. Lilac and grey, the heaving bay, slapped and torn by thousands of splashings of shot and spars. Great red stars peer through the smoke, a mast is broke short off at the lashings and falls overboard, with the rising moon flashing in its top-hamper.

There is a rattle of musketry; pipe-clayed, red-coated marines swab, and fire, and swab. A round shot finishes the job, and tears its way out through splintering bulwarks. The roar of broadside after broadside echoes from the shore in a long, hoarse humming. Drums beat in little fire-cracker snappings, and a boatswain's whistle wires, thin and sharp, through the din, and breaks short off against the scream of a gun crew, cut to bits by a bursting cannon.

Three times they clear the *Vanguard's* guns of a muck of corpses, but each new crew comes on with a cheer and each discharge is a jeer of derision.

The Admiral is hit. A flying sliver of iron has shivered his head and opened it, the skin lies quivering over his one good eye. He sees red, blood-red, and the roar of the guns sounds like water running over stones. He has to be led below.

Eight bells, and the poop of the *Orient* is on fire. "Higher, men, train your guns a little higher. Don't give them a loophole to scotch the flame. 'Tis their new fine paint they'll have to blame." Yellow and red, waving tiger-lilies, the flames shoot up—round, serrated petals, flung out of the black-and-silver cup of the bay. Each stay is wound with a flickering fringe. The ropes curl up and shrivel as though a twinge of pain withered them. Spasm after spasm convulses the ship. A Clap!—A Crash!—A Boom!—and silence. The ships have ceased firing.

Ten, twenty, forty seconds ...

Then a dash of water as masts and spars fall from an immense height, and in the room of the floating, licking tiger-lily is a chasm of yellow and red whirling eddies. The guns start firing again.

Foot after foot across the sky goes the moon, with her train of swirling silver-blue stars.

The day is fair. In the clear Egyptian air, the water of Aboukir Bay is as blue as the bottom flowers of a larkspur spray. The shoals are green with a white metal sheen, and between its sand-bars the Nile can be seen, slowly rolling out to sea.

The Admiral's head is bound up, and his eye is bloodshot and very red, but he is sitting at his desk writing, for all that. Through the stern windows is the blue of the sea, and reflections dance waveringly on his paper. This is what he has written:

"VANGUARD. MOUTH OF THE NILE.

August 8th, 1798.

MY DEAR SIR—

Almighty God has made me the happy instrument in destroying the enemy's fleet; which, I hope, will be a blessing to Europe... I hope there will be no difficulty in our getting refitted at Naples...

Your most obliged and affectionate

HORATIO NELSON."

Dance, little reflections of blue water, dance, while there is yet time.

IV NAPLES

"Get out of the way, with your skewbald ass. Heu! Heu!" There is scant room for the quality to pass up and down the whole Strada di Toledo. Such a running to and fro! Such a clacking, and clapping, and fleering, and cheering. Holy Mother of God, the town has gone mad. Listen to the bells. They will crack the very doors of Heaven with their jangling. The sky seems the hot half-hollow of a clanging bell. I verily believe they will rock the steeples off their foundations. Ding! *Dang!* Dong! Jingle-Jingle!

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