

# A Soldier Poet in France

Verses of Private Charles Divine, Author  
of "City Ways and Company Streets"

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## V. Fog

By Private Charles Divine.

Five days out and the fog crept in  
From horizon to rail, from dock to chin;  
Opaque, intangible enemy,  
The worst that a ship can meet at sea.

The gray hills hovered on every side,  
The sea was a valley a few feet wide,  
The convoy was gone, shut off from view;  
Adrift in a world of dripping dew.

The speed cones dropped from the forward spar.  
The engines lessened their pulsing jar,  
The shadows lay on rigging and rod,  
And we crept ahead by guess and by God!

The sun was a faint, far patch in the gray,  
A clammy twilight measured the day;  
And the night, ah, the phantoms that sometimes dash  
From the great gray fog with a sudden crash!

**DEAR BILL:** I've been so busy since coming  
to this camp that I haven't had much time  
for the writing—except a couple poems. One of  
the first details I got here was to take charge of  
some coolie labor.

I directed a gang of Chinese coolies in clearing  
away brush at the edge of camp. These particular  
coolies, who are mostly volunteers in the war and  
have been lent to the United States Government  
by France, have their home far away in Annam,  
which I have been led to believe is somewhere in  
the Malay Peninsula.

Annam isn't so far away, however, as to pre-  
vent the Annamites from bringing their native to-  
bacco with them. Its name, in their own language,  
it "thuot lao," and their corporal told me it's "like  
opium." He, by the way, works for the Standard  
Oil in Annam.

### Malaysia at the Front.

At 7 o'clock in the morning the detachment of  
Annamites came marching along to our rendezvous  
with the bushes. They came marching with picks  
and shovels and dressed in the most fantastic mili-  
tary motley I ever saw. Every one wore a different  
uniform—or rather a different collection of parts  
of uniforms—cast offs which France gave them and  
which look to have been worn in every branch of  
the service since Napoleon's time.

Some were in blue, some in red, some in yellow,  
some in khaki. Some were privates, according to  
their pants; sergeants, by the stripes on their arms;  
Captains, by their puttees, and Generals by their  
caps. They are all little fellows with ugly black  
stained teeth, and while they are too small to be  
much good as heavy laborers, yet they manage most  
dexterously in cutting away brush. At this and  
similar work they toil until 6:30 at night for a little  
over a franc a day—and a franc on such a day as  
to-day is worth about 17.5 cents in good Park Row  
money.

### Watch Your Hat and Coat.

The Annamites are adepts at killing time. All of  
a sudden you will discover that they have quit ply-  
ing their picks in order to lean on their handles and  
give way to an endless, noisy discussion on some  
topic of overwhelming interest to them. All I knew  
of its import was that it was full of bongs and  
congs and cais and toys.

Another method of killing time on the job is the  
Annamite's solicitude for his clothing. Whenever  
one of them starts to work he makes a neat pile of  
his blouse and cape and hood directly back of the  
spot where he is to work. It is a place he can watch  
while he digs. The moment he moves on to another  
digging place, a few feet away, he must go back,  
pick up his clothes and set them in a new spot close  
at hand, as if thieves were all around ready to  
pounce on his weird habiliments and carry them off.

### Put This in Your Pipe and—

A third diversion is the pipe. They are ex-  
tremely fond of smoking "thuot lao." It must be  
strong stuff, for they only take a pinch of it at a  
time. They jam a thumbful of the black, stringy  
tobac into the bowl of a tiny pipe, set it ablaze and  
take a long inhalation. As soon as the inhalation  
is ended they put the pipe away and go hopping  
back to work, greatly exhilarated and in a state so  
beatific that it must resemble trance.

Anything almost serves them for a pipe. One  
had a rubber hose a quarter of an inch in diameter  
and six inches long. Another had a piece of gal-  
vanized iron tubing with a nut on the end of the

bent up tube. The small opening in the nut was the  
bowl of the pipe. And one pipe is passed around for  
use among a dozen or more Annamites.

Well, Bill, I've got to stop now, it's getting dark  
and there is only candle light in my barracks.

CHICK.

## VI. Nguoi Annam

By Private Charles Divine.

He is leading his men over bushes and hills,  
He is making the dirt fly somewhere in France;  
It may be a day and a half to the front,  
Though it might be wherever it happened to chance.

An army of coolies, with backs bending fast,  
Who chatter in music of cai, low and bong,  
Like water from bottles now gurgling a tune;  
And the uniforms glitter like part of the song.

The brown, little, black haired Annamites,  
A stub of a nose and a slit for an eye,  
But a hand that can tilt with a valley or hill,  
Though hardly a one is a soldier high.

*Ouh di dau*, with your teeth stained black,  
Your wrinkled old faces that jabber so fast,  
*Toi si lom*, with your puff of *tabac*,  
That makes you go hopping, dream gossiping, past.

The corporal struts in his miniature pride:  
Nguoi Annam is a Colonel at least.  
By his vagabond costume assembled from scores  
Of heroes of France that have long been deceased.

Of horizon blue are his leggings and blouse—  
The horizon that day was a glorious view!  
His breeches are khaki, his stripes without end,  
And his conical hat is of native bamboo.

But he's leading his men over bushes and hills,  
Constructing a camp for the U. S. A.;  
With the lifting of shovels, the jingling of picks,  
The little brown army is fighting to-day.

*Ouh di dau*, with your shovels and picks,  
You're volunteers at a franc a day.

*Thuot lao*, your pipeful's a pinch,  
A long, long puff and you hop away.  
—From the Stars and Stripes.

## VII. Pork and Beans

By Private Charles Divine.

I pictured a post near the firing line,  
With the thrill of the battle around me, and hot,  
But I'm back where the cannons can never reach;  
Yes, I pictured a post—and look what I got!

A trick of guard duty, a silent night,  
In a Q. M. warehouse, full of supplies,  
Many a mile from a star shell's light,  
Where the pitch black rafters are all of my skies.

I pace up and down, with a gat on my hip,  
I listen to creaking of timber and board,  
In the echoing shed there are whispers to halt,  
And I've stumbled against something hollow (oh, Lord!

It's a coffin they made for a fellow who died  
Coming back from the front with a knee battered raw).  
Somebody forgot to relieve me at mess,  
And I'm hungry—(I wonder what battles he saw).

I'm hungry, and here in the darkness I pass  
Consignments of food that are piled on the floor.  
It's food that would make me feel better, I know,  
But it mustn't be touched while I'm at the door.

I bump into cases of pickles and jam,  
B. and M. pork and beans in New England style,  
Royal Ann cherries, my mouth waters quick,  
If I wasn't so hungry perhaps I could smile.

There are Mountainside apples, twelve tins to a case,  
And Yellow Cling peaches, one box is undone;  
And barrels of bacon from Ferris & Co.,  
And various jellies by Jones & Son.

There's Colgate & Company issue soap,  
Bull Durham tobacco, net fifty-two pounds.  
And boxes of stuff that a General eats—  
It's right at my side as I'm making my rounds.

But it mustn't be looted while I'm walking post.  
There are lads up in front who are chasing the Hun,  
Advancing and leaving their kitchens behind,  
And carrying only themselves and a gun.

At Chateau Thierry, the Oureq and the Marne,  
Out in the open, from red dawn to dawn,  
They're fighting like devils on hardtack and nerve,  
And fighting some more when the hardtack is gone.

And here at my elbow are raisins and prunes,  
Consigned from New York, and all that it means—  
Yes, I pictured a post near the firing line,  
But I'm guarding the infantry's pork and beans!

## VIII. In Saint Parize

By Private Charles Divine.

You walk in dreams, in Saint Parize—to enter there by  
day—

Through dazzling August afternoons, through every  
crooked way.

Go down the middle of the street, it's really more a lane,  
But oh! beware the silences of shuttered house and pane,  
Of courtyards walled in glaring stone and flowers twice  
as bright,

Beware the sun's white stillness, such magic tricks the  
sight.

The curtains abroad the windows of each epicerie,  
The Lion d'Or has drawn its blinds, as any one may see.  
Canary birds sit statuesque in cages by the door,  
Their crust of food, between the bars, is also bread of  
war!

As soft as down, the lifeless wind; like nymphs, the  
poplar trees;

Oh, everything is still as death, by day, in Saint Parize,  
The village pump is squeakless, its handle dangling  
loose;

You share the cobbled pavement with a drowsy, wan-  
d'ring goose.

The town lies in a golden swoon; a golden hornet hums:  
The scene befits a fairy tale, before the hero comes.

But walk in Saint Parize by night, ah! that's another  
tale,

When twilight and the soldiers come, on leave across  
the vale.

Go down the middle of the street, it's now a moving  
crowd

Of moneyed Yankees talking French, and footsteps  
ringing loud.

No more beware the silences of shuttered house and pane,  
For every door is open wide. "Bon soir, m'sieu!" It's  
plain

The golden swoon of afternoon was only casement deep,  
And Saint Parize did not lie dead, but in the shade to  
sleep.

It now awakes, the shops are full, the francs and coppers  
clink,

With sales of nuts and Spanish melons, postal cards  
and ink.

It's beaucoup this, and beaucoup that, and combien the  
cheese?

They do a thriving, jostling trade, by night, in Saint  
Parize.

The Lion d'Or is roused to life; so, too, is Jeanne's cafe,  
Its lace-befrizzled window panes look almost Sunday gay,  
They face the Place de la Fontaine, it's where the sabots  
clump—

To tell the truth, its name should be: The Square with  
the Squeaky Pump.

Inside, the pendent yellow lamp glows faintly through  
the room,

Though chiefly it's the laugh of Jeanne that dissipates  
the gloom.

Vin blanc or rouge, or limonade, and if you know her  
well,

A whisper brings a salad in a bowl that's like a dell.  
Dim, colored prints adorn the wall: Roger l'Isle  
is here

The time he tried the Marseillaise on Mayor Dietrich's  
ear.

The checkered oilcloth table tops, the red tiles on the  
floor,

The view across the darkling square beyond the open  
door:

Where now the pump is screeching high, and romping  
children tease;

A grandmere brings two pails to fill, a hoop to guard  
her knees;

A donkey cart goes homeward bound, with harvests  
gathered late,

The cure rides his bicycle, and rides it most sedate;  
A proud Poilu, permissionaire, is walking to and fro,  
Reviewing sights he used to see—and love—some years  
ago.

Again at nine they start for camp, the soldiers fill the  
street;

"Pas zigzag!" warns Madame, which means a sober  
trudge of feet—

Again a silence steals in town, a little tranquil breeze—  
A dream beneath an arch of stars, ah! that is Saint  
Parize.