

# THE LITERARY DIGEST

June, 1927: p. 50

## SOLDIER-MAN BLUES FROM SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE

**B**LACK man fights wid de shovel and de pick—Lordy, turn your face on me!” It is a company of colored American soldiers singing as they load and unload army trucks behind the battle-front at Toul. They have made up the song themselves. The first and third lines of each stanza are sung by a single voice, the second and fourth by all who care to join in. Parts of the song are lost in the noise of moving feet and the picking up or putting down of heavy objects. Sometimes it is more like an echo:

Black man fights wid de shovel and de pick—  
Lordy, turn your face on me;  
He never gits no rest 'cause he never gits  
sick—

Lordy, turn your face on me.

Jined de army fur to git free clothes—

Lordy, turn your face on me;

What we're fightin' 'bout, nobody  
knows—

Lordy, turn your face on me.

Never goin' to ride dat ocean no more—

Lordy, turn your face on me;

Goin' to walk right home to my cabin door—

Lordy, turn your face on me.

The middle stanza, remarks John J. Niles in his book, “Singing Soldiers” (Scribner), must have been composed by a philosopher, while the last one voices the general dread of seasickness which prevailed among the negro soldiers after their voyage to France. Lieutenant Niles tells of one colored man who deserted at the close of the war rather than go home on a ship.

“Yes, sar,” said the delinquent, “I knows I'se a deserter. I knows dey has a place made special fur me at Levensworth—but I ain't goin' to ride dat ocean. No, sar! An' if ever dey come atter me in sich numbers as I sees I must go home, den, by gollies, I'll jus' walk home, if I has to go 'round by way o' New Orleans.”

Another negro poet, known to fame only as Elmer, suffered from this same variety of blues on his voyage from Hoboken to France, as he relates in his song of “The Deep Sea Blues”:

Everybody in Hoboken town—everybody  
an' me,

Hopped upon a warehouse that was  
swingin' around

An' went to sea.

Oh, all day long I'se a-lookin' for trees,

Lookin' for sand, lookin' for land,

'Cause I'se got dose awful weepin', sleepin',

Got dose awful sailin', wailin',

Got dose awful deep-sea blues.

Elmer's blues, we are told, were always of the deep sea, and the sea was something he intended to avoid in his future life. The death of some colored soldiers at sea had made a profound impression on him, as did also the importance of the negro in the winning of the war. Thus he sang:

Soldiers down below layin' cold and dead—  
Everybody 'cept me—

Drop 'em overside loaded down wid lead—

While we'se at sea.

Oh, all day long, etc.

## SOLDIER-MAN BLUES

All dese colored soldiers comin' over to  
 France,  
 All dese soldiers an' me,  
 Goin' to help de whites make de Kaiser  
 dance,  
 All dese soldiers an' me.  
 Oh, all day long, etc.

These are only two of the many original war-time songs, hitherto unrecorded, which Lieutenant Niles has gathered into his book, "Singing Soldiers." He was an aviator all up and down the front, and behind it, but amid the turmoil of his activities he managed, because of his love and technical knowledge of music, to keep a record of the original songs he heard at the various camps, writing down the music as well as the words. Seven years, off and on, he spent on his book. It is a living, throbbing section of battle-front psychology—of profanity and nobility, roistering and religious exaltation, humor and tragedy—all mixed up together as in the World War itself. But the whole is written around the author's quest for new songs wrung from human hearts behind the battle-lines.

Lieutenant Niles found that the negro melodies were by far the best, and these—both words and music—fill the major part of his pages. They came right out of the heart of the composer and his surroundings at the moment. Thus we are told of a negro soldier, nicknamed the Chicken Butcher, who had used his razor too freely and therefore had to do time in "Black Jack's Jail-house at Jevres," Black Jack being the name sometimes given to Gen. John J. Pershing by those who saw the inside of the army lockup. The Chicken Butcher had become chastened by confinement, so much so that he was curing his waywardness by continually affirming his desire to be good. Hence his song of many verses such as these:

Oh, jail-house key,  
 Don't you ever lock me in.  
 Oh, jail-house key—  
 Won't never be bad no more.

Oh, dark ob de moon,  
 Don't you ever blight my life,  
 Oh, dark ob de moon—  
 Won't never be bad no more.

Oh, lightnin' bug,  
 Don't burn your pants.  
 Oh, lightnin' bug—  
 Won't never be bad no more.

Oh, jail-house blues,  
 How blue you can be.  
 Oh, Jail-house blues—  
 Won't never be bad no more.

A colored soldier from Chicago gave Lieutenant Niles two new war-time spirituals, "I Don't Want to Go" and "I'm a Warrior," with music of his own composing. The first stanza of the latter runs:

Oh, I'm a warrior in de army,  
 I'm a warrior for de Lord;  
 Oh, I'm a warrior,  
 I'm a warrior in'the army of de Lord.

A deeper religious philosophy seems to have inspired an orderly named William, when he wrote "The Gimmie Song":

I know I'se one ob God's chillun,

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)

## SOLDIER-MAN BLUES

An' he's goin' to gimmie what I needs;  
I know I'se one ob de select elect—  
One ob de chillun God always feeds.

### CHORUS

Oh, why do you stand in de snow and de  
rain,

Oh, why do you suffer from sickness and  
pain?

'Cause all ob you belongs to God,  
An' he's goin' to gib you what you need.

Oh, Moses hit dat desert rock—  
De Good Book up an' tells us so—  
While all de brethren stood hard by,  
Wonderin' if de water would really flow.

A flying partner of the author's—a boy from a fine family back in the States, he tells us—met death in a practise flight by taking the top off a chimney of a house in the quiet Rhone Valley. He tells how the tragedy gave him another song for his collection:

One evening in the fall of 1918, I suggested a haircut for both of us—a really first-class haircut, with lotions, perfumes, tonics, etc.

"Haircut, nothing. Come on, boy, I'll spend the money on some good drinkin' liquor. Haircuts don't become aviators, anyway. Why, I'm going to be bounced off in a few days—what's the use in wasting the money on French barbers!"

And now his mother would soon be in Paris. She would rest there a while and then visit the grave of her son—if I would help her find it.

Soon now his mother would be in Paris. I would be granted leave. We would visit the grave (if I could find it). She would shed a few tears, take some pictures. I would recite the tellable details of her son's army life. And she would return to her home in Ohio. . . .

Colored boys made up the burial squad. I might have got away before dark, but I heard part of a song sung by one of the grave-diggers. I remained and took it down in detail.

Here is a part of the song the colored boys sang as they worked at burying the fallen aviator:

I've got a grave-diggin' feelin' in my heart—  
I've got a grave-diggin' feelin' in my heart—  
Don't bury dose boys so deep in de ground;  
Dey has to hear Gabriel's reveille sound—  
I've got a grave-diggin' feelin' in my heart.

When all the saw-toothed bayonets and German helmets have rusted into iron oxid, Lieutenant Niles avers, we shall still have "Mademoiselle from Armentiers." The negro boys were chary of singing it, because they had little to do with its creation, but in white outfits, we are told, one was always sure to find a cook or a barracks jester who would, with little or no encouragement, sing 367 verses of this epic. Perhaps there were a few more verses than that; but it was from the 367th Infantry Regiment, known as "The Buffaloes," that the following sample stanzas were obtained:

Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez-  
vous,

Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez-  
vous,

I'se glad I is a Buffalo,

'Cause we is always on de go—

Inky Dinky, parlez-vous.

Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez-

**SOLDIER-MAN BLUES**

Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez-vous,  
I'd like to git myself a sip  
O' what you got restin' on your hip—  
Inky Dinky, parlez-vous.

Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez-vous,  
Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez-vous,  
I wouldn't give my high-brown belle  
For every mademoiselle dis side o' hell—  
Inky Dinky, parlez-vous.

Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez-vous,  
Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez-vous,  
I can't read nor I can't write,  
But, boy, when I has to, I can fight—  
Inky Dinky, parlez-vous.

Lieutenant Niles recalls with enthusiasm one of the army shows concocted to keep the boys from getting too homesick. It was given in the back rooms of an unused café chantant at Lyon, which the Y. M. C. A. had taken over for the proper housing of just such shows. Among other things—

They did the old sentry act—an American private walking post. He carries an old short-barreled rifle with a length of rubber hose slipt down over the end. As he walks, this length of hose waves up and down in the rhythm of his gait. It is supposed to be night. Some one approaches.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Troisième bataillon mitrailleuse—j'ai carte d'identité."

"Pass, Frog!"

Another is halted.

"Well, now, I say, my dear fellow, is it really in order for one to tell one's name?"

"Pass, Limey!"

Another attempts to pass.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Who the hell wants to know?"

"Pass, Yank!"

But we had applauded this before.

Then, tho we did not know it, the thing we had been waiting for all evening happened—the Ghost Act—ten negroes, one soloist and nine singing ensemble. They represented the ghosts of boys who had been bounced off in the war. They were costumed like members of the Ku Klux Klan. The effect was excellent—white shrouds—blue lights—sepulchral voices. The soloist stept forward and confidentially sang one line to the audience:

My mama tole me not to come over here—

Then the ensemble joined the singing:

But I did, I did, I did.

The soloist continued:

My mama said they surely would shoot me dead—

An' they did, they did, they did.