

'The Songs of a Broken Airman' by Jimmie Howcroft, 1922

The artifact

Book of poetry by Jimmie Howcroft, 1st edition 1922

The stories behind the artifact

James (known as Jimmie) Howcroft Junior (22nd May 1893 – September 1936) was born in Bolton, Lancashire. The son of James Howcroft and his wife Margaret, nee Coop. Jimmie's elder brother Fred was born in 1892. Jimmie's father taught at the Sunday school at Fern Street Wesleyan Chapel in Bolton.

Fred became a coal miner and Jimmie, who began work at the age of twelve, was apprenticed to an electrical engineer when he was fifteen. He worked as an electrician in various factories and was a keen sportsman in his spare time. After the death of the boys' father, Margaret re-married. Her second husband was Richard Taylor and in 1901, the family lived at No. 10 Haynes Street in Bolton. Richard and Margaret's only child, a daughter, died in infancy.

Like the majority of men in the early years of the Great War, the brothers saw it as their patriotic duty to fight, Jimmie joined the Royal Flying Corps as a mechanic and his brother Fred joined The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, and was sent to the Western Front. Like almost a million others, he never came home.

Jimmie, who played football for his Squadron, became an observer, which meant he could accompany pilots in planes, and he, too, was posted to The Western Front. He flew on active service for 23 Squadron as an observer/gunner, flying in Royal Aircraft factory F.Ee.2b pusher biplanes. On the 14th September, after a reconnaissance mission over the Somme, his pilot hit a telegraph pole on landing, sending the FE cartwheeling, and ejecting Jimmie from the 'pulpit' type cockpit. The crash resulted in Jimmie's back being badly fractured and he was sent back to Britain for treatment. The journey to London took three days, where he was in absolute agony.

For five years Jimmie lay in a hospital bed in The London Hospital, completely paralysed and unable to move. Jimmie's poems are a testament to his courage. As he could not move his arms or hands, he dictated the poems to his nurse, Phyllis Harding. On 20th May 1921, Jimmy was finally able to leave hospital. Jimmie's first collection, "Looking on", with a foreword by John Oxenham, was published in 1920 to critical acclaim. In spite of the cover price of two shillings and six pence – half a crown, as the coin was called, which would be equivalent to the purchasing power of £40 in today's money - became an immediate best seller, as war poetry was extremely popular. Using the money that the poetry sales had generated, he was able to purchase a cottage, 'Little Forest Gate Cottage' in Liphook, Hampshire. Two women also moved with him, the first, his devoted mother, Margaret Taylor; the other, Phyllis Harding, the nurse who had nursed him for his five-year stay in The London Hospital. They were both there to nurse him and attend to his every need.

Jimmie's dictated a second volume of poetry, presumably again recorded by Phyllis. This second collection, *'The Songs of a Broken Airman'*, had an introduction by John O'London, and was published by Hodder & Stoughton, London in 1922. Here it is in full:-

INTRODUCTION

In a small bungalow at Liphook, in Hampshire, a broken airman lies upon a bed from which he will not rise again. His spine is fractured, and he cannot shake hands with a visitor. For nearly seven years he had been helpless. He now lies under a window through which he can see the Downs, and the sunshine, and his old caravans of cloud. 'Jimmie' Howcroft is his name.

He was flying as an observer in France in September 1916, when his aeroplane crashed. Since then he has been paralysed, but although he is in constant pain his thoughts are clear, his heart buoyant. His tender and undaunted mother, who lost her only other boy in the war, is with him, and so is the nurse who looked after him in London Hospital. She gave up her regular career to help Jimmie Howcroft along that road of life upon which his feet can no longer tread.

In 1902 Howcroft published privately a sheaf of poems under the title *Looking On*. The success of the booklet was such that it has enabled him to live in greater comfort than would otherwise have been possible. A second edition was issued last year, and its success was even greater.

Howcroft has hitherto been his own publisher and bookseller. Requests for his poems, and warm expressions of sympathy for his fate, have reached his bedside from all parts of the world. He now re-issues, through an eminent publishing firm, his original twenty-eight poems, with ten added. He has taken the opportunity to revise his verses. Some of the poems are unaltered, but others, such as the lines 'to An Italian Vase,' 'A Tribute to a Floral Tribute,' and 'The Daily Round,' to name no others, he has more or less re-written. All their substance remains.

If poets learn in suffering what the teach in song 'Jimmie' Howcroft is of that company. Still in his earliest prime, as years go, he looks back on a life which he never dreamt was moving to catastrophe and to a lifelong test of fortitude.

At the age of twelve he began work as a "half-timer." At fifteen he was apprenticed to an electrical engineer, and later he worked as an electrician in textile and paper mills, steel works, and a motor cycle factory.

In 1915, at the age of twenty-two, Howcroft joined the Royal Flying Corps, and next year he became an observer in France. But his military service was terminated on a day in 1916 following a reconnaissance over the Somme area. A bad landing – a fractured spine!

He arrived at London Hospital three days after the accident. He had been the most active of men, a keen airman, and a member of his Squadron's football team. His hospital bed held him for five years. He was the most cheery and resourceful of patients, and his laugh led many a laugh.

It was in London Hospital that his thoughts wandered over earth and sky, and, making the sunshine their own, wandered into verse. His poems, dictated to his nurse (for he cannot write), breathe a courage and cheerfulness which are a lesson to us all.

The elements of Jimmie Howcroft's poetry are love of Nature, as expressed in such lines as 'Silence,' 'My Spirit Haunts The Hill,' 'By Bolton Town,' and many more; a tender and playful love of children and their fairy fancies, as in 'Wireless Wonderland' or 'The Mermaids come To Tea'; and a bravely quiet outlook on the world and his own lot in it, breathing in such poems as 'Have Courage,' 'The One Comfort,' 'Man's mismanagement,' and 'I Flew!' Seldom is he introspective, and then only to wave back despair before it can reach his soul.

'Then what am I?
A stricken pawn in a mighty plan,
Yet striving still to be a man.

Though hopeless sees the race to be
Yet breast it bravely, thou shalt see,
Like mist before the sun,
Thy trouble die, and fade away,
And joy be at the close of day
If thou hast nobly run.'

Such is Jimmie Howcroft, and of such fine stuff his songs are woven.

JOHN O'LONDON.

With the proceeds of his second volume, he was able to buy some chickens and start a poultry farm at his cottage. Jimmie suffered for 20 years after his accident almost to the day, he lived on until 1936 when he died in September. He was buried in the cemetery at St. Mary the Virgin Church in Bramshott, Hampshire.

"Songs of a Broken Airman" is dedicated to Phylliss, lifelong nurse. People from every social status and walk of life took his poetry to heart; one reviewer commented in the media at the time of publishing: "There are no circumstances, however, adverse, which a courageous spirit may not surmount."

Two of his poems as examples of those contained in his second volume:

'Homing' (written on the last day in hospital, 20th May 1921)- page 32 of 'Songs of a Broken Airman'

'Homing, homing, homing,
Sweet instinct and divine –
Sweetest in the gloaming.
When thoughts will e'er entwine
Old faces and old places,
Old songs we used to sing!
Though far we stray at the close of day
Homing thoughts will homeward wing.'

'To Sister' -on p. 33 of 'Songs of a Broken Airman'

'What understanding you express,
In your all-tending tenderness!
Your actions to my mind convey,
The things that words can never say.
When in the depths of dull despair,
Your ministry pursues me there,
To raise me up to things above,
Your sympathy commands my love.'