The Going of the Battery:

I

O it was sad enough, weak enough, mad enough -
Light in their loving as soldiers can be -
First to risk choosing them, leave alone losing them
Now, in far battle, beyond the South Sea! . . .

II

- Rain came down drenchingly; but we unblenchingly
  Trudged on beside them through mire and through mire,
  They stepping steadily--only too readily! -
  Scarce as if stepping brought parting-time nigher.

III

Great guns were gleaming there, living things seeming there,
Cloaked in their tar-cloths, upmouthed to the night;
Wheels wet and yellow from axle to felloe,
Throats blank of sound, but prophetic to sight.

IV

Gas-glimmers drearily, blearily, eerily
Lit our pale faces outstretched for one kiss,
While we stood prest to them, with a last quest to them
Not to court perils that honour could miss.

V

Sharp were those sighs of ours, blinded these eyes of ours,
When at last moved away under the arch
All we loved. Aid for them each woman prayed for them,
Treading back slowly the track of their march.

VI

Someone said: "Nevermore will they come: evermore
  Are they now lost to us." O it was wrong!
Though may be hard their ways, some Hand will guard their ways,
Bear them through safely, in brief time or long.

VII

- Yet, voices haunting us, daunting us, taunting us,
  Hint in the night-time when life beats are low
Other and graver things . . . Hold we to braver things,
  Wait we, in trust, what Time's fulness shall show.
The Going of the Battery:

This poem is about what happens when a group of soldiers and their field guns leave for service overseas. The guns collectively are the “battery” of the title, though this noun normally includes also the men who operate them - an artillery company. They are travelling by train to a port of embarkation for service overseas - probably South Africa, and the poem appears to have a setting at the time of the second Boer War.

The sub-title points us to the fact that a narrator (who is one of the deserted wives) speaks the poem. Hardy's concern in this poem is not really with war as such, so much as with the effect on the wives of the departure of their men folk. The poem is written in the first person as if spoken by the wife of a soldier: this is evidence of Hardy's trying to see the situation through the eyes of the women so deeply affected by the leaving of the men.

The jaunty rhythm, internal rhyme (in the first and third line of each stanza) and frequent alliteration ("through mirk and through mire"; "great guns were gleaming") echo the brisk marching pace of the soldiers. However the highly contrived rhyme and the stilted (artificial) syntax to which it leads (as in the penultimate stanza) make the narrator's mode of address seem somewhat unnatural. We do not (as we do with The Man He Killed) have a clear and immediate sense of the narrator's character.

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Stanza 1

Knowing that soldiers are "light in their loving" i.e. inconstant, the narrator acknowledges how foolish she and her friends have been to choose such men as husbands, even without the additional hardship of losing them to uncertain battle in a distant country. Note the internal rhyme: "sad ... mad", "choosing ... loosing". This will recur in every stanza.

Stanza 2

Undeterred by the driving rain the women walk through the blackness and through the mud underfoot. The despondency of the women as they trudge along is contrasted with the enthusiasm and eagerness of their menfolk "stepping steadily - only too readily!", almost as if the latter do not realise that he swifter their pace, the sooner will come the parting from their wives. This fact does not apparently cross the soldiers' minds, or, if it does, they are not unduly concerned about it.
Stanza 3

"There" in the first line, is not identified, but is evidently a station or point of entrainment. To the narrator's eye, the field guns, draped in tarpaulins resemble monstrous animals: "living things seeming there". This personification (or more precisely animation) of the guns is developed by the references to mouths ("upmouthed") and "throats": an apt image not only because they are round and open, but also because, though they are yet still ("blank of sound") they are "prophetic to sight"; one can see that they will, in due course, be heard.

Stanza 4

The gas-light, obscured by the driving rain, sheds faint and eerie light on the faces of the wives ("pale" both because of the faint light, and because they are chilled and fearful) as they wait for a farewell kiss and embrace their men, entreatling them ("a last quest" = a last request) not to seek danger which can honourably be avoided: to be brave but not foolhardy.

The use of the word "court" may be inadvertent on the narrator's part, but Hardy evidently is aware of the sense in which the army is a rival of the wives for the affections of their men, who "court" danger in battle as eagerly as they might once have in a literal sense courted their wives and sweethearts.

Stanza 5

The train, bearing all the men of the battery, ("all we loved") moves out, and the women sigh audibly, their eyes blinded (with tears, to say nothing of the rain and the gloom). As they retrace their steps, slowly now, and alone, the women pray for the safety of their men. Note the clumsiness which the internal rhyme creates in the highly stilted third line of this stanza.

Stanza 6

One of the women despairingly voices her fear that the men will never return, but the narrator contradicts this fear and asserts that God or benevolent fate ("some Hand") will guard the ways of the men and bring them home safely sooner or later. This assertion bespeaks a confidence which the narrator wishes to have but which may not really be so assured. The first and last stanzas of the poem make it clear that the narrator is anxious about the fate of the men. The hope that they will be safe is asserted almost as if to invoke protection over them: she must realise that soldiers are, in fact, often killed or wounded in battle.

Stanza 7

The pathos of the women's position is shown skilfully in this stanza in the presentation of the contrasting hopes and fears of the wives. In the night, "when life beats are low", the women are the prey of "voices" (their own imaginations or malicious spirits?) which "hint" at a less happy lot for their menfolk. The narrator and her companions, however, try to be brave and to wait in trust (trust in "some Hand" protecting the men) to see what will happen in the end.

The poem only refers to war insomuch as it represents danger to the men and so, possible heartbreak to their wives. There is neither suggestion that war is wrong, nor patriotic celebration of battle: the cause for which the men are fighting is apparently immaterial. It is merely implied by the contrasting attitudes of the men and their wives that war is exciting to soldiers but distressing to their wives, who try to come to terms with this distress, realising that marrying soldiers necessarily involves such risks as they now face.