

THE AISNE (1914-15)

We first saw fire on the tragic slopes  
Where the flood-tide of France's early gain,  
Big with wrecked promise and abandoned hopes,  
Broke in a surf of blood along the Aisne.

The charge her heroes left us, we assumed,  
What, dying, they reconquered, we preserved,  
In the chill trenches, harried, shelled, entombed,  
Winter came down on us, but no man swerved.

Winter came down on us. The low clouds, torn  
In the stark branches of the riven pines,  
Blurred the white rockets that from dusk till morn  
Traced the wide curve of the close-grappling lines.

In rain, and fog that on the withered hill  
Froze before dawn, the lurking foe drew down;  
Or light snows fell that made forlornier still  
The ravaged country and the ruined town;

Or the long clouds would end. Intensely fair,  
The winter constellations blazing forth—  
Pereus, the Twins, Orion, the Great Bear—  
Gleaned on our bayonets pointing to the north.

And the lone sentinel would start and soar  
On wings of strong emotion as he knew  
That kinship with the stars that only War  
Is great enough to lift man's spirit to.

And ever down the curving front, aglow  
With the pale rockets' intermittent light,  
He heard, like distant thunder, growl and grow  
The rumble of far battles in the night,—

Rumors, reverberant, indistinct, remote,  
Borne from red fields whose martial names have won  
The power to thrill like a far trumpet-note,—  
Vic, Vailly, Soupir, Hurtelise, Craonne . . .

Craonne, before thy cannon-swept plateau,  
Where like sere leaves lay strewn September's doud,  
I found for all dear things I forfeited  
A recompense I would not now forego.

For that high fellowship was ours then  
With those who, championing another's good,  
More than dull Peace or its poor votaries could,  
Taught us the dignity of being men.

There we drained deeper the deep cup of life,  
And on sublimer summits came to learn,  
After soft things, the terrible and stern,  
After sweet Love, the majesty of Strife;

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There where we faced under those frowning heights  
The blast that maims, the hurricane that kills;  
There where the watchlights on the winter hills  
Plickered like baldfire through inclement nights;

There where, firm links in the unyielding chain,  
Where fell the long-planned blow and fell in vain—  
Hearts worthy of the honor and the trial,  
We helped to hold the lines along the Aisne.

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