



THE BALLAD OF ST. BARBARA

When the long grey lines came flooding upon Paris in the plain,
We stood and drank of the last free air we never could taste again:
They had led us back from the lost battle, to halt we knew not where
And stilled us; and our gaping guns were dumb with our despair.
The grey tribes flowed for ever from the infinite lifeless lands
And a Norman to a Breton spoke, his chin upon his hands.

“There was an end to Ilium; and an end came to Rome;
And a man plays on a painted stage in the land that he calls home;
Arch after arch of triumph, but floor beyond falling floor,
That lead to a low door at last; and beyond there is no door.”

And the Breton to the Norman spoke, like a small child spoke he,
And his sea-blue eyes were empty as his home beside the sea:
“There are more windows in one house than there are eyes to see,
There are more doors in a man’s house, but God has hid the key:
Ruin is a builder of windows; her legend witnesseth
Barbara, the saint of gunners, and a stay in sudden death.”

It seemed the wheel of the world stood still an instant in its turning,
More than the kings of the earth that turned with the turning of Valmy mill:
While trickled the idle tale and the sea-blue eyes were burning,
Still as the heart of a whirlwind the heart of the world stood still.

“Barbara the beautiful
Had praise of lute and pen:



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Her hair was like a summer night
Dark and desired of men.

Her feet like birds from far away
That linger and light in doubt;
And her face was like a window
Where a man's first love looked out.

Her sire was master of many slaves
A hard man of his hands;
They built a tower about her
In the desolate golden lands,

Sealed as the tyrants sealed their tombs,
Planned with an ancient plan,
And set two windows in the tower
Like the two eyes of a man."

Our guns were set toward the foe; we had no word, for firing.
Grey in the gateway of St. Gond the Guard of the tyrant shone;
Dark with the fate of a falling star, retiring and retiring,
The Breton line went backward and the Breton tale went on.

"Her father had sailed across the sea
From the harbour of Africa
When all the slaves took up their tools
For the bidding of Barbara.



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She smote the bare wall with her hand
And bad them smite again;
She poured them wealth of wine and meat
To stay them in their pain.

And cried through the lifted thunder
Of thronging hammer and hod
‘Throw open the third window
In the third name of God.’

Then the hearts failed and the tools fell,
And far towards the foam,
Men saw a shadow on the sands
And her father coming home.”

Speak low and low, along the line the whispered word is flying
Before the touch, before the time, we may not loose a breath:
Their guns must mash us to the mire and there be no replying,
Till the hand is raised to fling us for the final dice to death.

“There were two windows in your tower,
Barbara, Barbara,
For all between the sun and moon
In the lands of Africa.

Hath a man three eyes, Barbara,
A bird three wings,
That you have riven roof and wall



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To look upon vain things?”

Her voice was like a wandering thing
That falters yet is free,
Whose soul has drunk in a distant land
Of the rivers of liberty.

“There are more wings than the wind knows
Or eyes than see the sun
In the light of the lost window
And the wind of the doors undone.

For out of the first lattice
Are the red lands that break
And out of the second lattice
Sea like a green snake,

But out of the third lattice
Under low eaves like wings
Is a new corner of the sky
And the other side of things.”

It opened in the inmost place an instant beyond uttering,
A casement and a chasm and a thunder of doors undone,
A seraph’s strong wing shaken out the shock of its unshuttering,
That split the shattered sunlight from a light behind the sun.

“Then he drew sword and drave her



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Where the judges sat and said
‘Caesar sits above the gods,
Barbara the maid.

Caesar hath made a treaty
With the moon and with the sun,
All the gods that men can praise
Praise him every one.

There is peace with the anointed
Of the scarlet oils of Bel,
With the Fish God, where the whirlpool
Is a winding stair to hell,

With the pathless pyramids of slime,
Where the mitred negro lifts
To his black cherub in the cloud
Abominable gifts,

With the leprous silver cities
Where the dumb priests dance and nod,
But not with the three windows
And the last name of God.”

They are firing, we are falling, and the red skies rend and shiver us,
Barbara, Barbara, we may not loose a breath—
Be at the bursting doors of doom, and in the dark deliver us,
Who loosen the last window on the sun of sudden death.



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“Barbara the beautiful
Stood up as queen set free,
Whose mouth is set to a terrible cup
And the trumpet of liberty.

‘I have looked forth from a window
That no man now shall bar,
Caesar’s toppling battle-towers
Shall never stretch so far.

The slaves are dancing in their chains,
The child laughs at the rod,
Because of the bird of the three wings,
And the third face of God.’

The sword upon his shoulder
Shifted and shone and fell,
And Barbara lay very small
And crumpled like a shell.”

What wall upon what hinges turned stands open like a door?
Too simple for the sight of faith, too huge for human eyes,
What light upon what ancient way shines to a far-off floor,
The line of the lost land of France or the plains of Paradise?

“Caesar smiled above the gods,
His lip of stone was curled,



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His iron armies wound like chains
Round and round the world,

And the strong slayer of his own
That cut down flesh for grass,
Smiled too, and went to his own tower
Like a walking tower of brass,

And the songs ceased and the slaves were dumb;
And far towards the foam
Men saw a shadow on the sands;
And her father coming home....

Blood of his blood upon the sword
Stood red but never dry.
He wiped it slowly, till the blade
Was blue as the blue sky.

But the blue sky split with a thunder-crack,
Spat down a blinding brand,
And all of him lay back and flat
As his shadow on the sand.”

The touch and the tornado; all our guns give tongue together
St. Barbara for the gunnery and God defend the right,
They are stopped and gapped and battered as we blast away the weather.
Building window upon window to our lady of the light.
For the light is come on Liberty, her foes are falling, falling,



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They are reeling, they are running, as the shameful years have run,
She is risen for all the humble, she has heard the conquered calling,
St. Barbara of the Gunners, with her hand upon the gun.
They are burst asunder in the midst that eat of their own flatteries,
Whose lip is curled to order as its barbered hair is curled....
Blast of the beauty of sudden death, St. Barbara of the batteries!
That blow the new white window in the wall of all the world.

For the hand is raised behind us, and the bolt smites hard
Through the rending of the doorways, through the death-gap of the Guard,
For the cry of the Three Colours is in Condé and beyond
And the Guard is flung for carrion in the graveyard of St. Gond,
Through Mondemont and out of it, through Morin marsh and on
With earthquake of salutation the impossible thing is gone,
Gaul, charioted and charging, great Gaul upon a gun,
Tip-toe on all her thousand years and trumpeting to the sun:
As day returns, as death returns, swung backwards and swung home,
Back on the barbarous reign returns the battering-ram of Rome.
While that that the east held hard and hot like pincers in a forge,
Came like the west wind roaring up the cannon of St. George,
Where the hunt is up and racing over stream and swamp and tarn
And their batteries, black with battle, hold the bridgeheads of the Marne
And across the carnage of the Guard, by Paris in the plain,
The Normans to the Bretons cried and the Bretons cheered again....
But he that told the tale went home to his house beside the sea
And burned before St. Barbara, the light of the windows three,
Three candles for an unknown thing, never to come again,
That opened like the eye of God on Paris in the plain.



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