

Foes lurking in our rear. There was no drum beat,
 No ordered march, Our officers looked grave;
 The rank and file uneasy, jogging elbows
 As do recruits when flinching.

All at once,
 Rounding a corner, we are hailed in French
 With cries for help. At double-quick we join
 Our hard-pressed comrades. They were grenadiers,
 A gallant company, but beaten back
 Inglorious from the raised and flag-paved square
 Fronting a convent. Twenty stalwart monks
 Defended it—black demons with shaved crowns,
 The cross in white embroider'd on their frocks,
 Barefoot, their sleeves tucked up, their only weapons
 Enormous crucifixes, so well brandished,
 Our men went down before them. By platoons
 Firing, we swept the place; in fact, we slaughtered
 This terrible group of heroes, no more soul
 Being in us than in executioners.

The foul deed done—deliberately done—
 And the thick smoke rolling away, we noted
 Under the huddled masses of the dead
 Rivulets of blood run trickling down the steps;
 While in the background solemnly the church
 Loomed up, its doors wide open. We went in.
 It was a desert. Lighted tapers starred
 The inner gloom with points of gold. The incense
 Gave out its perfume. At the upper end,
 Turned to the altar as though unconcerned
 In the fierce battle that had raged, a priest,
 White-haired and tall of stature, to a close
 Was bringing tranquilly the mass. So stamped
 Upon my memory is that thrilling scene,
 That, as I speak, it comes before me now—
 The convent built in old time by the Moors;
 The huge brown corpses of the monks; the sun
 Making the red blood on the pavement steam;
 And there, framed in by the low porch, the priest;
 And there the altar brilliant as a shrine;
 And here ourselves, all halting, hesitating,
 Almost afraid.

I, certes, in those days,
 Was a confirmed blasphemer. 'Tis on record
 That once, by way of sacrilegious joke,
 A chapel being sacked, I lit my pipe
 At a wax candle burning on the altar.
 This time, however, I was awed—so blanched
 Was that old man!

"Shoot him!" our Captain cried.
 Not a soul budged. The priest beyond all doubt
 Heard; but as though he heard not. Turning round,
 He faced us, with the elevated host,
 Having that period of the service reached