

To France

Sheldon - Williams



Not in Watters

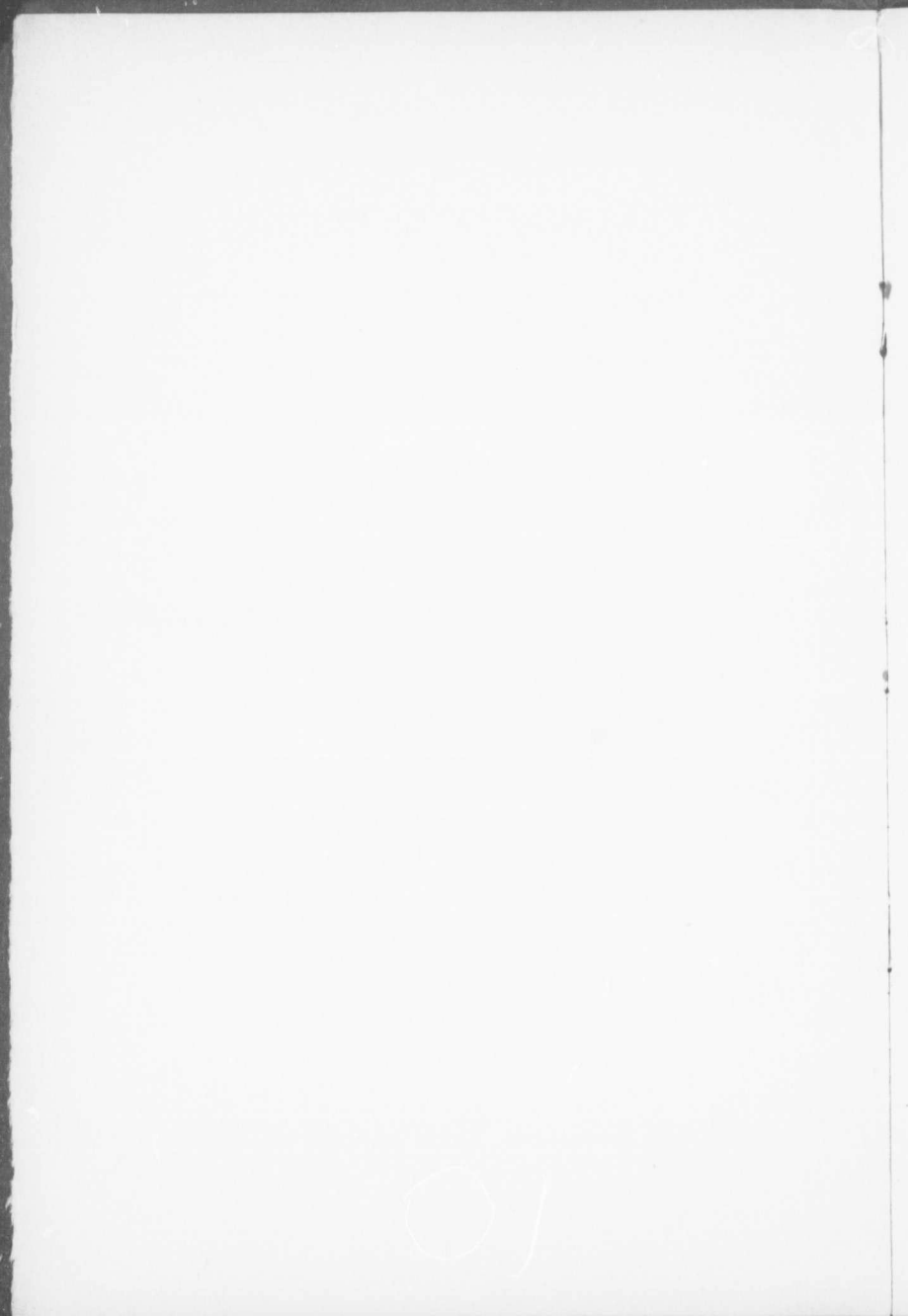
N.P. (191-?)

To France



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FRANCE

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NAMES LIKE TRUMPETS

(*"Places . . . with names like trumpets."*
London "Observer," Aug. 5th, 1917.)

Martinpuich and Pozières,
Courcellette and Guillemont,
Mouquet Farm, Le Sars and Flers,
Contalmaison, Destremont.

Mellow as orchard beneath Autumn's caresses,
Sweet to the tongue as fruit ripe to the wooing
Were our names in the dead rose-red days ere war's stresses
Shocked us from dreams to our piteous undoing.

Souchez River, Carency,
Angres, the Bois d'Hirondelle,
Lièvin and Givenchy,
Vimy's height and Vimy's hell.

Mellow as anthems our belfries once chanted,
Sweet to the ear as a trumpet's far crying,
Shall our names be for all time, though, history-haunted,
Our streets and our orchards lie outraged and dying.

Honour's gentle accolade
Falls on every knightly name.
Hear the faint fanfaronade,
Silver-sweet, each style proclaim.

(*Before Lens, Aug. 15th, 1917.*)



AUTUMN AFTERNOON IN ARTOIS

On an Autumn afternoon—
Dear September still was smiling—
I, an idle hour beguiling,
Watched a weary land aswoon
In a brief surcease from pain;
Hardly might I mark the stain
Flung by battle's hand defiling;
Distant hung the dull reviling
Of the blackened lips of Cain,
Ere, beneath the small, pale moon,
Hell, refreshed, gave tongue again.

On that Autumn afternoon—
Sweet September all aswoon—
Seemed this land a gentle place,
As the Lotus Land in grace;
Hollowed softly to the eye
In a shallow pleasauncie;
A vast but gracious bowl of green
Rimmed full round with deeper sheen
Of copse and forest to the sky
That leaned to kiss it sleepily.
A fragrant bowl, a pot-pourri,
It seemed that afternoon to me,
A very gem of artistry.
A bowl of dainty porcelain ware
It lay around me, lying there
Beneath its echoing further rim;
Its colours were a little dim
As must be beauty seen through tears
Or beauty chastened by the years;
And all its scents and all its sounds

Were muted, as when one with wounds
Lies in a room dressed soberly
In lavender and dimity.
But scents there were and sounds to hear:
The breath of flower that flouted fear,
The voice of tiny, humble bird—
A choir of these just now I heard—
Who shamed me from the painted roof
Of this my dream-land; quaint reproof
From one who soared, remote, aloof
From fear's thrice-horrid strife with fear
That man's vainglory thinks must tear
All glad Creation's weft and woof.

Its colours were in minor key—
The colours of my pot-pourri—
Or so, perhaps, it seemed to me,
Who knew my lovely flower-bowl lay
In jeopardy from day to day,
And had, in sooth, felt shock on shock
That yet its beauty made a mock
By adding pride to beauty's store
And touching every crack and flaw
With glory's whitely flaming brush.
Howbeit, that day there drowsed a hush
That clothed each moment with an awe
Of things of guessing; and the more
In mellowness of pigmentry,
In still but lucent dignity
Glowed my pot-pourri.

Ordered copse and forest dim,
Fluted all the shallow rim
In darkest green that sometimes crept,
While restless-dreamed cloud-shadows slept,
To where the whole wide floor was swept
By green in all its hundred moods;
By green of meadows, green of woods;

By green a-sigh in broken pride
For leafy way, for forest ride
That loitered, ere the old world died,
Soft-footed, shy, and fancy-free,
Coy lists for woodland amourie;
By green whose swelling bosom fed
Ten little villages with bread;
By green of richest mantling, flecked
With russet kine and flocks who recked
Nought but the distant meads that becked
To fatter fare from day to day;
By green a-gilt for honeyed hay.

And here and there in pattern bold
The great highways, now grey and cold,
Sprang up or couched, as, fold on fold,
All the champaign before me rolled.
The great highways with trumpet names
That held in fee of riband-hold
Cities whose storied deeds are flames
To fire a world grown old.
The white high-road on market-day,
Ere dropt the sun his level ray,
When the world was all a-sing
And the sturdy metalling
Set each sober hoof a-ring;
And the sentry poplars dressed
Their shadows swart towards the West,
But shook them in the morning breeze
To tell they only jested, lest
The children in their high-day best
Should doubt the friendly trees.
The white high-road from day to day
That bound each little village gay
To neighbour village, rosy red
In warm-tiled cote and wide-flung stead
Whose timbers took the season's tone,
Whose years had washed the mother-stone

With russet, orange, green and brown,
Whose shadows never seemed to frown
But held the sunshine's memory
In golden mote-dust, dancingly.

Orchard, garden, pleasaunce there
Offered gifts of fragrance rare,
Offered gifts to every sense,
"Gold and myrrh and frankincense."
And all about this homeland lay
The homely breath of "every day,"
The kindly touch of common-place
Lifted by God to near His face.

So, that Autumn afternoon,
When September still seemed smiling,
I forgot the foul defiling
Of a trinity of years,
And, with imagery beguiling
Place and hour from ambushed fears,
Held a moment in my hand
As a gem that haunted land
Ere, shocked rudely from her swoon,
Shivering, crept abroad the moon.
But now the sun in kindness shone
This gem of craftsmanship upon
And let his rainbow fingers lie
Upon my porcelain pot-pourri;
With master brush and pencil made
Its bowl anew in shifting jade,
And lit the patterned tracery
Of village, hamlet, cote and byre
To ruddy, pulsing flattery
That shamed the thought that they must die
And be as trampled one with mire.
The bleaching flaws and fissures even,
White as white bones of warm flesh riven,
A shroud of cleaner kind were given,

Enamel, or of ivory,
 And shyly riveted anew
 By rosemary here, and there by rue.

Nearby a shrinking, breathless plot
 Smiled for an hour, a beauty-spot
 Fluted with pearly, cruciform
 Emblazonings.

There, ensanct from storm,
 'Mid but not of the embattled throng
 Astride their dreams, sleep still and long
 A weary score whose task among
 Us ended soon.
 And ruby-red the poppy flew
 Its ensign clear, and sapphire-blue
 The cornflower jeweled the green, and sweet
 Was everywhere the marguerite.

Small, and afraid, anon the moon
 Her candle held, dim and awry,
 To night and hell and devilry.
 And then once more it seemed to me
 That chill and wan, in death aswoon
 And shattered, lay my pot-pourri.

September 9th, 1917.

