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THE NORMAL SCHOOL BULLETIN

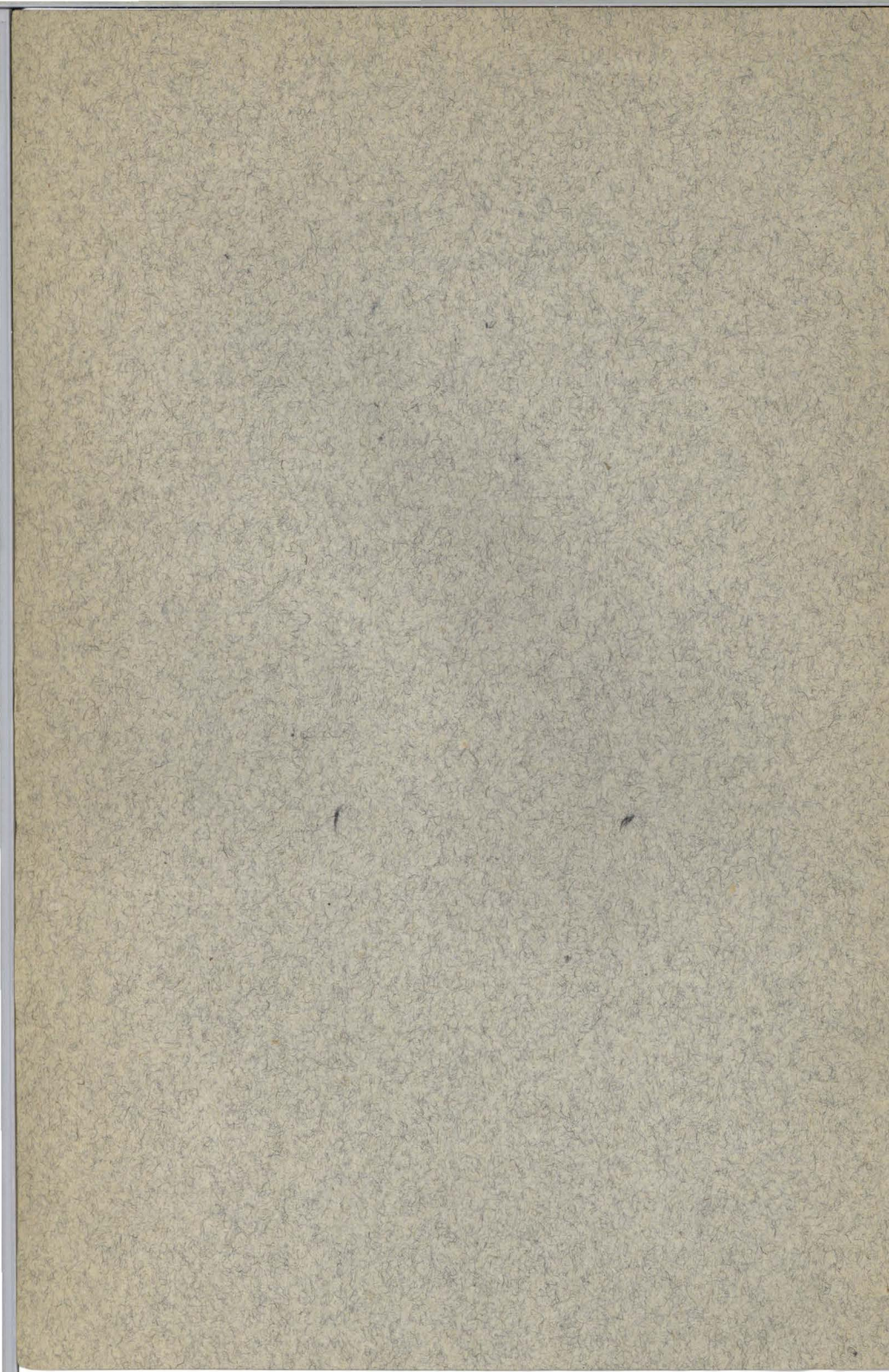
Eastern Illinois State Normal School, Charleston

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Reading Aloud: War-Time Suggestions

By
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Lake Forest University

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CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

July 1, 1918

Reading Aloud: War-Time Suggestions

By

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Formerly Professor of English in
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READING ALOUD: WAR-TIME SUGGESTIONS

There is no more valuable exercise for classes in English than reading aloud, when well taught. Appreciation of the spirit of literature, analysis of the structure and assimilation of the forms of good writing, exercise in the expression of a wider range of ideas and emotions than come usually within the direct experience of a young student, discipline in the technique of utterance and tone, all these it must bring—when well taught.

That is not all. If the teacher is fully awake to its possibilities, it offers practice in composition, written and oral, in the way of comment, explanation, and discussion, which is likely to reach higher levels in point of graceful and vivid form and intimate and heightened feeling than are reached usually in the 'real life' compositions based on the student's personal experience. The style of what he is reading is carried over, to some extent, into his own comment. Moreover, the boys and girls are likely to talk and write with freer play of emotion when discussing stories and verses which have really touched them; whereas young people, like the rest of us, are shy of showing feeling about their personal affairs.

Yet the possibilities of reading aloud are not often realized in school. Partly because the teachers do not know what to do; partly—which amounts to the same thing—because they are afraid of themselves and fear that they cannot do what they would like to see done.

This self-distrust is quite needless. In this work especially you learn to do by doing. Any teacher who knows and loves literature can develop good work in reading aloud by investing the same energy as in the course in written composition. But you cannot be perfunctory, or merely conventional; you must put your own heart into the class work. If you will study and practice the art of reading for yourself, along with your pupils, methods and devices will suggest themselves of which at first you had no conception.

One serious difficulty comes from the lack of suitable reading material for the first stages of such a course. The essential for good reading aloud is interest in the *matter*. That is true of children, and true of us all. Very few persons are interested in form except as related to matter. Now the "classics" studied in the English course, rich and beautiful as they are, are far re-

moved from the daily interests of the children. You can work up to them, but you should begin with something nearer, writings of to-day, which will make an immediate appeal. And you should put your attention at first merely upon the thought, to bring that out as fully and as spiritedly as can be done, regardless of school-room conventionalities and regardless, for the time, of points of vocal technique. Gradually the children can be led to discover the usefulness of technique in bringing out the thought in which they are interested, and thereafter the road is easy.

But to-day, this year, English teachers have a splendid quarry of fresh material ready to hand. In using it, moreover, they will be doing their bit for their country, as truly as in buying Liberty Bonds or helping with Red Cross work.

Day by day our newspapers and magazines are printing poems on the war, telling of the heroism of the boys Over There—English, French, American—and of the loyalty and sacrifice of those they have left behind. These poems express the very heart of our people. Some of them are of high quality, judged by severest standards of form. Many others, less sure in point of form, are no less noble in thought and feeling, and no less worthy attention to-day. Teachers of English can do nothing better for their children—and for the men and women these children will become—than to familiarize them with these voices of their own land in its time of devotion. How much explicit discussion of the war and its causes and significances we should have in the schoolroom is a question; the saturation point comes soon with young people. But these verses expressing the heart of our land reach and inspire the heart of every American who comes to know them. To teach them to the children of to-day is the best sort of Americanization work, the best foundation for nobler patriotism in us all.

Moreover it is a sure initiation into the knowledge of literature. From these voices of our own age you can pass on later to poems and prose of other lands and times. They will be the bridge to the classics which it is the teacher's especial duty to open to the children's comprehension.

As to your material, I should say by all means choose it for yourself. Several anthologies of war-poems have been published: *Poems of the Great War* (The MacMillan Company); *A Treasury of War Poetry* (Houghton Mifflin Company); *Drums and Fifes*, the little volume issued last year by the Vigilantes, a patriotic association of American authors; *Songs from the Trenches*, a collection recently announced, by soldier authors; *Service's Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*, and others. But none of them is suitable for class use. Some are too 'literary'; some dwell too much on the 'horrors' and so on. I wish some one would get out a collection, by authors famous or unknown, expressing in simple,

direct language, not hero-worship, not the glory of war, but the courage and devotion of ordinary men and women in the crisis of the world's fate. The selection for such a volume should turn upon the matter, and the simplicity and universality of feeling.

But no such collection exists, and therefore you will do best to make up your own book with typewriter and mimeograph. Use these anthologies—the public library will get them for you; use the files of the *Literary Digest*, which prints every week a few poems—many of them to be sure over the heads of our young readers; run through the files of a large city daily, if you can get at them. With little trouble you can collect fifty or sixty which seem to you suitable for your particular use, and then, by watching the papers and magazines, you can add to your stock week by week.

Throughout your work, in selecting and studying and teaching, bear in mind simplicity, directness, naturalness. There is no place for affectation or sentimentality in this work. These poems deal with the supreme tragedy of the modern world, but in spite of that fact—or rather because of that fact—they are told in language, in a word-order, often, almost like prose. Make your enunciation as clear-cut and delicate as possible. Let your tones be clear, steady, and sensitive. Study the grouping of the thought, so that you bring out the rhythm of each stanza and of the stanza-sequence, and the melody, never theatrical but always full of passion and always subtly varying. You—and your children—will read them best if you read them *almost* like prose. The emotion, the high poetic fervor, the poetic color, will shine through all the plainer.

Here are a few of the poems I mean. I have read all of them in public programmes and I know their direct, gripping power. The least 'literary' of your pupils will understand them. The brief suggestions as to rendering are intended merely as a basis for your own analysis; if you wish further suggestions regarding any of the poems, I shall be glad to answer any questions.

First let us take the magnificent sonnet of Rupert Brooke, *The Dead*. It is printed in his *Poems*, and in the Houghton Mifflin *Treasury of War Poetry*.

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!

There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,

But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.

These laid the world away; poured out the red

Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be

Of work and joy, and that unhopèd serene,

That men call age; and those who would have been

Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,
 Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
 Honor has come back, as a king, to earth,
 And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
 And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
 And we have come into our heritage.

The mood here is solemn but triumphant, the movement slow and weighty; sorrowful, but admiring; and tender, not unhappy. This is a poem which should be carved upon every schoolroom wall, so noble and inspiring in utterance as in thought.

The two divisions of the sonnet are here markedly different in tone and cadence. The first eight lines should be spoken in sustained, rather high pitch, like a public proclamation. Then there comes a pause. The first three words of line 9 resemble line 1, but on a lower pitch. From here on we have a series of strong, proud assertions, each ranging wide in pitch; there are wide sweeps on *Holiness; lacked so long; Love; Pain; Honor; king to earth; Nobleness; our heritage.*

From *Holiness* there are thus five pitch-waves, culminating in *Honor*; in lines 11 and 12 a gradual drop, except for a slighter wave on *as a king to earth*; lines 13 and 14 repeat the cadence of 11 and 12, but on a lower pitch. The last words are earnest, but low in pitch, and quiet.

Equally lofty and proud, though expressing poignant grief, is *Red Robed France*, by an American, Charles Buxton Going, published in *Everybody's Magazine*, last Christmas.

1. The Huns stripped off my own green gown
 And left me stark and bare;
 My sons, they spread a red robe down
 And wrapped me in it there.
2. The garb they brought was red as blood—
 The robe was red as flame;
 They wrapped me in it where I stood
 And took away my shame.
3. Was ever web so costly wove
 Or warp so glorious spun?
 I'll wear no vestment prized above
 That wide and scarlet one.
4. Though younger sons, some happier day,
 Weave me a fair green gown
 Anew, or bid me don array
 Of corn-ripe gold and brown.
5. The names—like beads, told one by one—
 My heart will still repeat;
 Will call, with tears, each dear, dear son,
 Whose red robe wrapped my feet.

The words are all short, and simple, but weighty. In several lines nearly every word must be emphasized: verse 1, lines 1, 3; verse 2, lines 1, 2; verse 3, all; verse 5, all, except *by* and *will*. The movement is steady and slow, throbbing with passion too deep for any outburst. Only in verse 3, lines 1, 2, is there a flash of triumphant pride—to be suggested perhaps by very clear tones, slightly raised in pitch.

Throughout the poem must be enunciated with absolute distinctness, though with deep sadness. The tone is not loud, but full. No minor cadences; no whining.

The melody is especially to be studied. The poem falls into three divisions: verses 1 and 2; verse 3; verses 4 and 5. In verses 1 and 2 there are four assertions almost exactly alike in cadence; verse 1, lines 1, 2, almost a monotone; a slight rise near the end, but a falling inflection on *bare*. The other lines have each a slight rise and fall, the widest sweep, on *flame*, not more than a musical 'fifth'; verse 2, lines 3, 4, are quicker, dropping to the pitch of the opening.

Verse 3, lines 1, 2, begins eagerly, and continues on a steady high pitch to *no*, line 3, the highest point; then a drop to the pitch of *Was*.

Verses 4, 5, begin higher than did verse 3, but *happier* is the highest word; from this the cadence is all downward; verse 4 is all quicker and lighter than the other verses; the two lines at the close are low in pitch; earnest, but soft.

The key-words: *red robe, wrapped, blood, flame*, etc., should be given with slightly lingering pressure, somewhat like 'portamento' touch on the piano.

Boys and girls of high school age could hardly realize or express such grave, intense passion in other times; this year, alas, they can.

Here is one somewhat similar in idea, and also, in another way, direct and gripping—the weight of passion is less tremendous, however, the feeling is expressed more smoothly: *The Spires of Oxford*, by Winifred M. Letts. It may be found in *A Treasury of War Poetry*.

1. I saw the spires of Oxford
 As I was passing by,
 The gray spires of Oxford
 Against the pearl-gray sky.
 My heart was with the Oxford men
 Who went abroad to die.
2. The years go fast in Oxford,
 The golden years and gay,
 The hoary colleges lock down
 On careless boys at play.
 But when the bugles sounded war
 They put their games away.

3. They left the peaceful river,
The cricket-field, the quad,
The shaven lawns of Oxford,
To seek a bloody sod—
They gave their merry youth away
For country and for God.
4. God rest you, happy gentlemen,
Who laid your good lives down,
Who took the khaki and the gun
Instead of cap and gown!
God bring you to a fairer place
Than even Oxford town!

This must be spoken very quietly and smoothly; it is almost a prayer. Not one loud word—the emphasis comes rather through softening the tone, at the fifth and sixth lines of verses 1, 3, and 4, for example. Here too the enunciation must be perfect, though delicate; thus you may be able to suggest the suppressed excitement which appears in the number of sharp-cut monosyllables in emphatic points of the simple statements.

There are three sections: verse 1; verses 2 and 3; verse 4. Verse 1 consists of two remarks: lines 1-4 and 5-6; utter them almost like quiet prose; lines 3, 4, a little higher than 1, 2, and lines 5, 6, softer and lower.

Then a pause before verses 2, 3. This group begins about a "third" higher than verse 1. Lines 1-4 are lighter, line 5 is sharper—dwell slightly on *war*, the point highest in pitch. Verse 3 follows verse 2 with hardly a pause, making, with lines 5, 6 of verse 2, a series of three assertions: the last line of verse 3 is earnest, but low—not noisy.

The pause here is longer than after verse 1. Two exclamations in this verse: the first, lines 1-4, strong and fervent; the strongest words *rest* and *happy gentleman*; the last two lines, parallel in cadence with lines 1-4, are earnest, but low and soft.

Here is one of a different cast—File Three, which appeared in B. L. T.'s column in the Chicago Tribune, and was reprinted in the Literary Digest, October 6, 1917: the author's name is given merely as P. S. W. It is prefaced by the following note:

("General Pershing stopped in his walk, turned sharply, and faced File Three."—*London Dispatch*.)

1. File Three stood motionless and pale,
Of nameless pedigree;
One of a hundred on detail—
But would I had been he!
2. In years a youth, but worn and o'd,
With face of ivory;
Upon his sleeve two strands of gold—
Oh, would I had been he!

3. The General passed down the line,
And walked right rapidly,
But saw those threads and knew the sign—
Ah, had I been File Three!
4. "Twice wounded? Tell me where you were,"
The man of stars asked he.
"Givenchy and Lavenze, sir"—
Ch, where was I, File Three!
5. Then crisply spoke the General:
"You are a man, File Three."
And Tommys' heart held carnival—
God! Would I had been he!

There are few verses in the language more crisp and virile than these—Browningesque, the *Literary Digest* calls them. This too is almost like prose; it is prose fused into poetry by direct, sincere feeling—in spite of the fact that a few lines are trivial in wording: verse 3, line 2; verse 4, line 2; and perhaps verse 5, line 3. The parallel development of the two themes—the story of the soldier-boy and the mounting emotion of the narrator—is a remarkable achievement.

Do not accentuate the rhythm. Make each line crisp and quick, like eager talk—almost matter-of-fact. The pitch changes are not wide, except in the last verse; then line 2 is ringing and enthusiastic, and line 4 deeper, but quick and strong.

Bring out the stages of the narrator's growing excitement, as shown in the closing lines of each verse: in verses 1, 2, intense but held in check; verse 3, stronger—no man says *Ah* in real life unless he really forgets himself; verse 4, bitter regret; verse 5, strong as you can say it, though *not loud*.

The French names in verse 4 are sounded somewhat like *shivonshi* and *lah-vonzah*.

And here is one about our own boys, on the way to take their places in the tremendous struggle—April: *Marching Song*. It was printed in the 'Sun Dial' column in the *New York Evening Sun*, on April 19 last, without signature.

1. When Pershing's men go marching, marching
into Picardy—
With their steel aslant in the sunlight and their
great gray hawks a-wing
And their wagons rumbling after them like
thunder in the Spring—

Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp,
Till the earth is shaken—
Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp,
Till the dead towns waken!
And flowers fall, and shouts arise
from Chaumont to the sea—
When Pershing's men go marching,
marching into Picardy.

2. Women of France, do you see them pass
to the battle in the North?
And do you stand in the doorways now
as when your own went forth?
Then smile to them, and call to them,
and mark how brave they fare
Upon the road to Picardy that only
youth may dare!
- Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp,
Foot and horse and caisson—
Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp,
Such is Freedom's passion—
And oh, take heart ye weary souls
that stand along the Lys,
For the New World is marching,
marching into Picardy!
3. April's sun is in the sky and April's
in the grass—
And I doubt not that Pershing's men are
singing as they pass—
For they are very young men, and
brave men, and free
And they know why they are marching,
marching into Picardy.
- Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp,
Rank and file together—
Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp,
Through the April weather,
And never Spring has thrust such blades
against the light of dawn
As yonder waving stalks of steel that
move so shining on!
4. I have seen the wooden crosses of
Ypres and Verdun,
I have marked the graves of such as
lie where the Marne waters run,
And I know their dust is stirring by
hill and vale and lea,
And their souls shall be our captains
who march to Picardy.
- Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp,
Hope shall fail us never—
Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp,
Forward and forever!
And God is in His judgment seat and
Christ is on His tree—
And Pershing's men are marching,
marching into Picardy.

Where is there a more splendid picture of the New Army of which we are so proud? This poem calls for all the dash and fervor you possess. The swift swinging movement runs magnificently from beginning to end—a slight pause after each stanza to catch your breath, but hardly any interruption of the quick, firm beat.

It is easier to read than the first three poems I have quoted; the rhythm marks itself easily—the irregularity of the metre-grouping within the lines avoids the monotony often found in poems of continuous rhythm—and the sentences run freely in a natural word-order. One striking feature, which should be brought out with care, is the *groups* of words: ‘*Pershing’s-men-go-marching*’; ‘*steel-aslant-in-the-sunlight*’; ‘*great-gray-hawks-a-wing*’; ‘*flowers-fall*’; ‘*shouts-arise*’; ‘*Women-of-France*’; ‘*do-you-see-them-pass*’ etc., etc. It is these groups, or phrases, which do most to give the long, swift, swinging *stride* which this poem suggests so notably.

The French names may offer some difficulty, but their pronunciation will come easier this year than heretofore: *Chaumont* is *shoꝛ-maꝛ*; *Lys* is *lee*; *Ypres* is *yeeprah*—very nearly. And *Picardy* should be sounded without dwelling too long upon the final *cc*-sound. We Americans are prone to sound *y* in such syllables (particularly if at all emphatic) too long; here it should be unmistakably *cc*, but a short, quick sound.

Verse 1. Heavy beat; dwell on the words giving sound-suggestion: *march*, *steel*, *aslant*, *sunlight*, *great gray hawks*, etc. The same precision of enunciation is needed here as in the other poems I have quoted; every consonant should be carved out, so that the bones of every word-group are strong enough to carry the richly varied sound-pictures—*steel* with a sharp *s* and a sharp *t*, preparing for a long *ee* that has no suggestion of short *i*; *great gray hawks*, framed in with two clear-cut hard *g*'s and a sharp *ks*, etc.

The refrain, here as in all the verses, must be heavy, quick, almost a monotone—the *tramp* lines wholly monotone. Line 2 is a little lower in pitch than line 1; but rises slightly on the last word; lines 3 and 4 like 1 and 2, but higher each by a half-tone. A slight pause after line 4; then begin line 5 quickly—almost a rag-time effect—the rest of the line in swift-gathered groups, and line 6 slower again, closing on the pitch of the first *Tramp*.

Verse 2. Very regular and even. The refrain like that of verse 1, but higher and stronger in lines 5, 6, and featuring *New World*.

Verse 3. The grouping of words into phrases is noticeable here. Line 3 is especially interesting—very smooth and flowing through *young*, then in three even groups.

Verse 4. This also is flowing, but greater. The beat is noticeably lighter, here, until the last half-line. The refrain is much the same as in verse 3.

The melody is also to be studied. No wide pitch-range in any one verse, but a constant variation; read it like eager *prose-talk*. Each refrain begins a half-tone up from the close of its

verse, and sinks at the end to the pitch of the beginning of the verse. Verse 2 begins perhaps a 'third' higher than verse 1 did; verse 3, a 'third' higher than verse 2; verse 4 at the pitch of verse 1.

Here is another, equally fervid, also in the movement of the prose-talk—America, by Rose Pastor Stokes. It appeared in the *Century Magazine* for January, this year. I have seen no more striking expression of the meaning of America's part in the war, and of its pre-eminent call to her own race, than these verses of the American-Jewish Socialist.

O America!
 The sons of Britain wear the uniform of the king;
 The sons of France, the republic's uniform;
 The sons of Russia, now the sons of light,
 Wear the uniform of free Russia.
 In all the Allied world
 Where soldier-patriots are,
 Each wears the uniform of his dear land.
 But, Oh America!
 Your sons march down your Avenues,
 Embarking for strange shores,
 To fight in other lands
 For peoples other than their own.
 With a look in their eyes no army ever had before,
 With a love in their hearts no army ever felt before,
 Wearing the uniform of world-democracy.

That is why I love you,
 That is why I am ready to give my all to you,
 O my America!

The unusual form—strong rhythm but irregular, unrhymed lines, gives this peculiar reality and power. Do not accentuate the rhythm except by uttering each line as a unit.

The poem falls into three divisions, or waves: lines 1-8; 9-16; and 17-19. Each division begins with a short, eager exclamation, followed by a rush of swift clauses. Speak the words with the cadence and intonation of fervid prose. Mark off the waves, a slight pause after the first, and a longer after the second.

Bring out the melody. The first division begins on medium pitch, then rises, and ends rather low in pitch. The second division is all set higher, rising to an exultant climax on the last words. The third division is low, deep, earnest, the last two words stronger, a little higher, and after a slight, eager pause.

Of the many poems telling the feelings of the mothers and wives who have seen their boys go, I know none so beautiful and delicate as this—The Little Mother, which appeared in the 'Sun-Dial' of the New York Evening Sun sometime in March of this year. The author, G. W. Gabriel, has been, I think, a member of the Sun staff.

1. A little mother lives over the way,
A little mother, frail and gray,
And she cannot read, and she cannot write,
But she sent her son to France to fight.
2. So every night I go over there,
And while she sits in her rocking-chair
I read her the names of the soldier dead,
And the names of the wounded, that list so red.
3. She hears me, shaking, until I've done.
Thank God, no mention *yet* of *her* son.
If I must read it, what shall I say
To the little mother over the way?
4. The days must be long, and the nights long, too,
For all mothers now, but most to you,
Poor little mother, frail and gray,
Who cannot read, but can only pray!

This is even more simple; quiet, and tender. And this also should be read *almost* as if it were prose, but very delicately, as if you were quietly telling the story to a friend. No sob-stuff here!

The rhythm is regular but light, and must not be accentuated. But every word must be quietly, steadily distinct. The *I*, wherever it occurs, must be subordinated.

The pitch-changes are slight, but conversational; *not* a monotone, except for two lines: verse 1, line 4; and verse 4, line 1.

Each verse is a unit. After verse 1, a rather long pause, with the second verse beginning rather eagerly; after verse 2, a short pause; the longest pause after verse 3.





