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| Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967)**Counter-Attack**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| WE’D gained our first objective hours before |   |
| While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes, |   |
| Pallid, unshaved and thirsty, blind with smoke. |   |
| Things seemed all right at first. We held their line, |   |
| With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed, | *5* |
| And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench. |   |
|   The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs |   |
|   High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps |   |
|   And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud, |   |
|   Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled; | *10* |
|   And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair, |   |
|   Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime. |   |
|   And then the rain began,—the jolly old rain! |   |
|    |  |
| A yawning soldier knelt against the bank, |   |
| Staring across the morning blear with fog; | *15* |
| He wondered when the Allemands would get busy; |   |
| And then, of course, they started with five-nines |   |
| Traversing, sure as fate, and never a dud. |   |
| Mute in the clamour of shells he watched them burst |   |
| Spouting dark earth and wire with gusts from hell, | *20* |
| While posturing giants dissolved in drifts of smoke. |   |
| He crouched and flinched, dizzy with galloping fear, |   |
| Sick for escape,—loathing the strangled horror |   |
| And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead. |   |
|    |  |
| An officer came blundering down the trench: | *25* |
| ‘Stand-to and man the fire-step!’ On he went... |   |
| Gasping and bawling, ‘Fire-step ... counter-attack!’ |   |
|   Then the haze lifted. Bombing on the right |   |
|   Down the old sap: machine-guns on the left; |   |
|   And stumbling figures looming out in front. | *30* |
|   ‘O Christ, they’re coming at us!’ Bullets spat, |   |
| And he remembered his rifle ... rapid fire... |   |
| And started blazing wildly ... then a bang |   |
| Crumpled and spun him sideways, knocked him out |   |
| To grunt and wriggle: none heeded him; he choked | *35* |
| And fought the flapping veils of smothering gloom, |   |
| Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans... |   |
| Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned, |   |
| Bleeding to death. The counter-attack had failed. |   |

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