

# The Marne

Edith Wharton



**ABOUT THE READING** As a child, American Troy Belknap spent many happy summers in France before World War I broke out. When he was fourteen, his beloved tutor, Paul Gantier, went to fight for his country and died in the first Battle of the Marne. At the age of eighteen, Troy joins the Foreign Legion and becomes an ambulance driver at the war's front in France, but leaves his ambulance behind when a truckload of French soldiers invite him to join them. In this excerpt, Troy wakes up in the hospital after being shot as he tried to help a wounded man to safety in the second Battle of the Marne. Troy himself was rescued by an unknown soldier who carried him to safety and then disappeared.



*As you read the passage below, note what Troy does not tell his friend Jacks. The following words might be new to you: **hilt, haggard, providentially**. You may want to look them up in a dictionary.*

Troy, burning with fever, lay on a hospital bed.

He was not very clear where the hospital was, or how he had got there; and he did not greatly care . . .

He groaned and tossed and got no comfort, till suddenly, opening his eyes, he found Jacks [a fellow ambulance driver] sitting by his bed.

He poured out his story to Jacks in floods and torrents: there was no time to listen to what his friend had to say . . .

The third night (someone said it was the third night) the fever dropped a little. Troy felt more quiet, and Jacks, who had turned up again, sat beside him and told him all the things he had not been able to listen to the first day—all the great things in which he had played an unconscious part.

“Battle of the Marne? Sure you were in it—in it up to the **hilt**, you lucky kid!”

And what a battle it had been! The Americans had taken Vaux and driven the Germans back across the bridge at Château-Thierry, the French were pressing hard on their left flank, the advance on Paris had been checked . . .

As Troy lay and listened, tears of weakness and joy ran down his face. The Germans were back across the Marne, and he had really been in the action that had sent them there! The road to Paris was barred . . . He felt light as a feather, and if it had not been for his deathly weakness he would have jumped out of bed and insisted on rejoining the ambulance. But as it was he could only lie flat and feebly return Jacks' grin . . .

There was just one thing he had not told Jacks: a little thing that Jacks would not have understood. Out in the wheat, when he had felt that tap on the shoulder, he had turned round quickly, thinking a friend had touched

**The First World War****Literature**

him. At the same instant he had stumbled and fallen, and his eyes had grown dark; but through the darkness he still felt confusedly that a friend was near, if only he could lift his lids and look . . .

He did lift them at last; and there, in the dawn, he saw a French soldier, **haggard** and battle-worn, looking down at him. The soldier wore the uniform of the *chausseurs à pied* [French infantry], and his face was the face of Paul Gantier, bending low and whispering: “*Mon petit—mon pauvre petit gars* [My little—my poor little lad] . . .” Troy heard the words distinctly, he knew the voice as well as he knew his mother’s. His eyes shut again, but he felt Gantier’s arms under his body, felt himself lifted, lifted, till he seemed to float in the arms of his friend . . .

He said nothing of that to Jacks or anyone, and now that the fever had dropped he was glad he had held his tongue. Someone told him that a sergeant of the *chausseurs à pied* had found him and brought him to the nearest *poste de secours* [rescue station], where Jacks, **providentially**, had run across him and carried him back to the base. They told him that his rescue had been wonderful, but that nobody knew what the sergeant’s name was or where he had gone to . . .

(“If *ever* a man ought to have had the Croix de Guerre [War Cross medal]—!” one of the nurses interjected emotionally.)

Troy listened and shut his lips. It was really none of his business to tell these people where the soldier had gone to: but he smiled a little when the doctor said: “Chances are a man like that hasn’t got much use for decorations . . .”

And then the emotional nurse added: “Well, you must just devote the rest of your life to trying to find him.”

Ah, yes, he would do that, Troy swore—he would do it on the battle-fields of France.

**ANALYZING LITERATURE**

1. **Main Idea** What is the significance of Troy’s experience of being carried out of the wheat field by Paul Gantier?

---



---



---

2. **Critical Thinking: Making Inferences** Why do you think Troy didn’t tell the others about his experience of being rescued by Paul Gantier?

---



---



---