

OPEN LETTERS.

Martial Epitaphs.

A STROLL through any of our national cemeteries will suggest the idea that the War Department has official knowledge of but one elegiac poem. Quotations from this one poem are repeated over and over, at the gateways and on painted boards at the turns of the avenues among the graves. In Antietam cemetery one might pick up and put together almost the entire production from these inscriptions. Some stanzas are striking in imagery, as well as perfect in technique, especially the quatrain oftenest quoted:

On Fame's eternal camping-ground
Their silent tents are spread,
But Glory guards, with solemn round,
The bivouac of the dead.

But the poem—at least for the purpose to which it has been so ostentatiously put—has a radical and fatal fault. It lacks all moral character. Its sole argument is, These men were killed in battle, therefore they are to be glorified, no matter whether they were making righteous or unrighteous war. The elegy would be quite as appropriate for Tecumseh's mercenary braves at the Thames, or the Sepoys that were blown to shreds at Lucknow, or the Zulus that fell at Rorke's Drift, or the Tae-pings at Canton, or the Mahdi's dead in the Soudan. You may chant the same dirge for the Dyaks and the Maoris that fell in their murderous forays.

If this were the best we could say for the men that saved the Union, however musical the lines in which we express it, I, as an American citizen, should be heartily ashamed of American letters; though we hardly had a right to expect more from this poem, since it was written to commemorate volunteer soldiers who had lost their lives in an unholy war, that with Mexico—known to be so at the time, and since pronounced so by the most illustrious man that took part in it (see Grant's "Memoirs," Vol. I., p. 53). Let me broaden the proposition. If the cause of the Confederacy was just, or if its advocates thought it was just, this poem, it seems to me, is not worthy of being quoted over the graves of those who fell in the vain attempt to establish it.

Had the Quartermaster-General taken the trouble to inquire of some one conversant with American poetry, he might have learned that there is no lack of appropriate verses having both poetic merit and moral character, with which he could at least have given some variety to the literature of our national cemeteries. Here is an instance:

They marched and never halted,
They scaled the parapet,
The triple lines assaulted,
And paid without regret
The final debt.

The debt of slow accruing
A guilty nation made,
The debt of evil doing,
Of justice long delayed,
'T was this they paid.

On fields where Strife held riot,
And Slaughter fed his hounds,
Where came no sense of quiet,
Nor any gentle sounds,
They made their rounds.

They wrought without repining,
Till, weary watches o'er,
They passed the bounds confining
Our green familiar shore,
Forevermore.

The poem from which these stanzas are taken was written by Theodore P. Cook, a journalist of Utica, who served in the 14th New York Artillery during the civil war. Here are eight lines from a poem written on the eve of the battle of Fredericksburg by Michael O'Connor, a sergeant in the 140th New York Infantry, who died in the service:

May all our boys who fall be found
Where men lie thickest at the front,
Where brave hearts bore the battle's brunt,
Contesting every inch of ground;
Though well we know dead men to be
But broken tools that Freedom flings
Aside, alas! as useless things,
In carving out her destiny.

From Henry Howard Brownell, one of the few famous poets that have actually participated in the battles they have described, might be chosen several appropriate passages—unless, indeed, his poetry is too vigorously loyal for the temper of the time. He was an ensign on the flagship *Hartford* when she led the fight in Mobile Bay. Dr. Holmes called him "our battle laureate," and wrote an article for "The Atlantic Monthly" to prove that he deserved the title. These stanzas are from the close of Brownell's "Bay Fight":

O Mother Land, this weary life
We led, we lead, is 'long of thee;
Thine the strong agony of strife,
And thine the lonely sea.

Ah, ever, when with storm sublime
Dread Nature clears our murky air,
Thus in the crash of falling crime
Some lesser guilt must share.

To-day the Dahlgren and the drum
Are dread apostles of his name;
His kingdom here can only come
By chrism of blood and flame.

But never fear a victor foe—
Thy children's hearts are strong and high;
Nor mourn too fondly—well they know
On deck or field to die.

Nor shalt thou want one willing breath,
Though, ever smiling 'round the brave,
The blue sea bear us on to death,
The green were one wide grave.

For a briefer inscription, four lines from a poem by Rossiter W. Raymond, who served as a staff-officer, would be appropriate:

Whether we fight or whether we fall
By saber-stroke or rifle-ball,
The hearts of the free will remember us yet,
And our country, our country will never forget!

OPEN LETTERS.

157

Benjamin F. Taylor, the poet and essayist, had a son in one of the Western armies, and himself followed that army as a press correspondent. These lines, from his "Cavalry Charge," are picturesque, sympathetic, and significant:

There are ragged gaps in the walls of blue,
Where the iron surge rolled heavily through,
That the Colonel builds with a word again
As he cleaves the din with his "Close up, men!"
And the groan torn out from the blackened lips,
And the prayer doled slow with the crimson drips,
And the beaming look in the dying eye
As under the cloud the stars go by.
But his soul marched on, the Captain said,
For the Boy in Blue can never be dead.

Richard Realf served for three years in the 88th Illinois Infantry, and some of his lyrics were written in the field, where he won promotion by his skill and gallantry. He was a friend of Lytle, the soldier and poet, when the general fell at Chickamauga. Here are two striking stanzas from Realf:

I think the soul of Cromwell kissed
The soul of Baker, when,
With red sword in his bloody fist,
He died among his men.
I think, too, that when Winthrop fell,
His face toward the foe,
John Hampden shouted "All is well!"
Above that overthrow.

And Lyon, making green and fair
The places where he trod,
And Ellsworth, sinking on the stair
Whereby he passed to God,
And those whose names are only writ
In hearts, instead of scrolls,
Still show the dark of earth uplift
With shining human souls.

Edmund Clarence Stedman, who was with the Army of the Potomac, wrote perhaps a dozen martial poems. From his "Gettysburg" might be quoted:

The bells that peal our triumph forth anon shall toll the brave,
Above whose heads the cross must stand, the hillside grasses wave.
Alas! alas! the trampled grass shall thrive another year,
The blossoms on the apple-boughs with each new spring appear;
But, when our patriot soldiers fall, Earth gives them up to God;
Though their souls rise in clearer skies, their forms are as the sod;
Only their names and deeds are ours—but, for a century yet,
The dead who fell at Gettysburg the land shall not forget.

These lines are from George H. Boker's "Black Regiment," and would be eminently appropriate in a cemetery where the dusky heroes of Olustee and Fort Wagner are represented:

"Freedom!" their battle-cry—
"Freedom! or leave to die!"
Ah! and they meant the word,
Not as with us 't is heard,
Not a mere party shout.
They gave their spirits out,
Trusted the end to God,
And on the gory sod
Rolled in triumphant blood.

During the last year of the war Edna Dean Proctor contributed to the publication of a sanitary fair a noble poem from which I take these stanzas:

Mother Earth, are the heroes dead?
Do they thrill the soul of the years no more?
Are the gleaming snows and the poppies red
All that is left of the brave of yore?

Are there none to fight as Theseus fought
Far in the young world's misty dawn?
Or to teach as the grey-haired Nestor taught?
Mother Earth, are the heroes gone?

Gone? In a grander form they rise!
Dead? We may clasp their hands in ours,
And catch the light of their clearer eyes,
And wreath their brows with immortal flowers.
Wherever a noble deed is done,
'T is the pulse of a hero's heart is stirred;
Wherever the Right has a triumph won,
There are the heroes' voices heard.

A little "Dirge for a Soldier," by the Rev. Samuel P. Merrill, which has been much admired, contains these lines:

The heart so leal and the hand of steel
Are palsied aye for strife,
But the noble deed and the patriot's meed
Are left of the hero's life.
The bugle call and the battle ball
Again shall rouse him never;
He fought and fell, he served us well;
His furlough lasts forever.

John G. Whittier was in his fifty-fourth year when the civil war began, and could not have taken part in it even had he not been a Quaker. But as he had been mobbed for promulgating antislavery doctrines, on one occasion barely escaping with his life, he may fairly be said to have been under fire in the preliminary skirmishes. He wrote some of the finest poems that were inspired by the war, and this passage from one of them might properly find a place among our public epitaphs:

The future's gain
Is certain as God's truth; but meanwhile pain
Is bitter, and tears are salt: our voices take
A sober tone; our very household songs
Are heavy with a nation's griefs and wrongs;
And innocent mirth is chastened for the sake
Of the brave hearts that nevermore shall beat,
The eyes that smile no more, the unreturning eyes.

James Russell Lowell's "Commemoration Ode" necessarily comes to mind in this connection. It has several passages that would grandly decorate our national cemeteries, perhaps none better than this:

Many loved Truth, and lavished life's best oil
Amid the dust of books to find her,
Content at last, for guerdon of their toil,
With the cast mantle she hath left behind her.
Many in sad faith sought for her,
Many with crossed hands sighed for her;
But these our brothers fought for her,
At life's dear peril wrought for her,
So loved her that they died for her,
Tasting the raptured fleetness
Of her divine completeness:
Their higher instinct knew
Those love her best who to themselves are true,
And what they dare to dream of dare to do.

As I rehearse one after another of these living lyrics, the land seems as full of poetry to-day as it was full of carnage a quarter of a century ago. If the War Department wants poetry, it need not make a requisition beyond its own rolls. The very men that won the great battle have themselves furnished the best elegies for the sacred dust of their fallen comrades.

Rossiter Johnson.