S. H. M. Byers

Selected Poems

Samuel Hawkins Marshall Byers

July 23, 1838 [Pulaski, Pennsylvania] –
May 24, 1933 [Los Angeles, California]

[Samuel Hawkins Marshall Byers (b. July 23, 1838) was a poet, author, U.S. diplomat, and Civil War veteran. His came to Oskaloosa, Iowa with his father in 1853 and studied law with a local attorney, gaining admittance to the bar in 1861. At the outbreak of the Civil War he enlisted with Company B of the 5th Iowa Infantry. Following the battle of Missionary Ridge (Chattanooga, TN) he was taken prisoner and sent to Libby Prison. After a succession of prison transfers and and two brief escapes (Macon, GA, Charleston, SC, and"Camp Sorghum" near Columbia, SC), Byers was moved with a group of prisoners to"Camp Asylum", an old mental hospital at Columbia. While imprisoned here he wrote the poem for which he would become nationally known--"Sherman's March to the Sea". A copy of this work was famously smuggled out of the camp in the artifical leg of exchanged prisoner Lt. Daniel Tower, after which it became widely circulated and its title popularly adopted for William Tecumseh Sherman's Savannah Campaign. He wrote the lyrics for"Song of Iowa" (adopted as the state song in 1911), and after moving to California wrote poetry for the Los Angeles Times. S.H.M. Byers died in Los Angeles on May 24, 1933.]

The March to the Sea. Boston: Arena Publishing Company, 1896.
The Happy Isles and Other Poems. Chicago: Rand, McNally and Company, 1901.
The Bells of Capistrano and Other Poems. Los Angeles: The Grafton Publishing Corporation, 1916.

Sherman's March to the Sea

Our camp -fires shone bright on the mountains,
That frowned on the river below,
While we stood by our guns in the morning,
And eagerly watched for the foe;
When a rider came out from the darkness
That hung over mountain and tree,
And shouted,"Boys, up and be ready!
For Sherman will march to the sea!"

Then cheer upon cheer for bold Sherman
Went up from each valley and glen,
And the bugles re -echoed the music
That came from the lips of the men;
For we knew that the stars in our banner
More bright in their splendor would be,
And that blessings from Northland would greet us,
When Sherman marched down to the sea.

Then forward, boys! forward to battle!
We marched on our perilous way,
And we stormed the wild hills of Resaca-
God bless those who fell on that day!
Then Kenesaw, dark in its glory,
Frowned down on the flag of the free;
But the East and the West bore our standards
And Sherman marched on to the sea.

Still onward we pressed, till our banners
Swept out from Atlanta's grim walls,
And the blood of the patriot dampened
The soil where the rebel flag - falls.
Yet we paused not to weep for the fallen,
Who slept by each river and tree,
But we twined them a wreath of the laurel,
And Sherman marched on to the sea.

O! proud was our army that morning,
That stood where the pine darkly towers,
When Sherman said, “Boys, you are weary;
Today fair Savannah is ours.””
Then sang we a song for our chieftain,
That echoed o’er river and lea,
And the stars in our banner shone brighter,
When Sherman marched down to the sea

The Story of a Famous War Song

The song of ”Sherman’s March to the Sea” was written by S. H. M. Byers -then adjutant of the 5th Iowa Infantry-while a prisoner of war in Columbia, South Carolina. The music was composed by Capt. J. O. Rockwell. The song was first sung by a prison glee club among the six hundred officers in the prison, and was received with great excitement. A copy of it was secretly carried through the enemy’s lines to Sherman’s army, in a hollow artificial leg, by Capt.Tower, of Ottumwa, Ia. The author escaped from prison shortly afterwards and heard the song sung by the whole of Sherman’s army. The campaign from Atlanta to the ocean at once took on the name of the song-“ Sherman’s March to the Sea.” A million copies were sold at the close of the war, but as it was not copyrighted the authors received nothing. The music has been long out of print, but the words were sometimes sung to the air of ”The Red, White and Blue.”

The Mowing

The clock has struck six,
And the morning is fair,
While the east in red splendor is glowing;
There is dew on the grass, and a song in the air,
Let us up and be off to the mowing.

Wouldst know why I wait,
Ere the sunlight has crept
O'er the fields where the daisies are growing ?
Why all night I've kept my own vigils, nor slept ?
'Tis today is the day of the mowing.

This day and this hour
Maud promised to tell
What the blush on her cheek was half showing—
If she wait at the lane, I'm to know all is well,
And there'll be a good time at the mowing.

Maud's mother has said,
And I'll never deny,
That a girl's heart there can be no knowing,
Oh! I care not to live, and I rather would die,
If Maud does not come to the mowing.

What is it I see ?
'Tis a sheen of brown hair,
In the lane where the poppies are blowing.
Thank God! it is Maud -she is waiting me there,
And there'll be a good time at the mowing.

Six years have passed by,
And I freely declare
That I scarcely have noticed their going;
Sweet Maud is my wife, with her sheen of brown hair—
And we had a good time at the mowing.

A Sonnet of Love

Who am I? Master of the human soul,
Whom never any mortal yet defied,
Youth nor old age, bridegroom nor bride.
Born of the gods, all beauty is my dole;
Lips smile, eyes meet; that instant I control
Soul, heart and being. There, beside
Him I have conquered, I abide;—
His hell or paradise, I am the whole.
He doth not will it whom my arrow stings
To sudden joy, or still more sudden pain;
Spite of himself, Love's sweet or bitter things
Evade he cannot -and, one smile to gain,
Beyond the grave he'd follow on swift wings,
For I am that which death hath never slain.

Maid and Butterfly

(From the German)

A maiden idly wandered
Through wood and cool retreat,
And as she stopped to gather
A nosegay from the heather,
A butterfly passed by her,
And kissed her lips so sweet.

"O! pardon," said the rover,
"O! pardon, maiden fair, I
sought amid the flowers
The honey that is ours,
And took your red lips blooming
For roses growing there."

"For this time," said the maiden,
"Forgiveness—it is by;
But I must beg to mention,
And press to your attention,
These roses are not blooming,
For every butterfly."

Alfred Tennyson

On his fair island of the sea
He tuned his lyre, and by the shore,
There rose such bursts of harmony
As England never heard before.

Men had not known our English tongue
Could sweep so soft through song and tale,
In notes such as an Orpheus sung,
With voice like England's nightingale.

Beside the sounding sea he walked,
It swelled to music when he came—
The glist'ning waves together talked,
The very sand-hills knew his name.

Poet of beauty. Maidens knew
How sweetly deep his words could thrill,
Though tenderer than a rose they grew,
His verse but made them tenderer still.

He touched sweet ghosts of long ago,
Through far-off vistas, joys and tears;
He kissed their hands, he loved them so,
They smiled across a thousand years.

King Arthur, Launcelot, Elaine,
He brought them back, he gave them breath;
And Guinevere, and all her train—-
For them there is no longer death.

Wrapt in the glory of his song,
His leaves of laurel on their brow,
On Fame's glad wings they sweep along,
They are the whole world's children now.

Himself a ghost, not dead, for lo!

He walks with Shakespeare, side by side!
Like some bright star that still may glow,
When night into the day has died.

The sweet enchantment of his verse,
Like burning Sappho's wondrous rhyme,
Like songs that birds at dawn rehearse,
He gave us till the end of time.

Beethoven's Symphony

Pile on the turf," the farmer said,
"And let the embers glow,
The poor man's house is quickly warmed,
Whatever winds may blow.
And thou, O stranger, by our hearth
Accept our humble cheer,
For down the lanes the north wind blows,
The night is cold and drear.

"And down the Baden hills there comes
The sound of breaking storm.
The Danube holds no cheer tonight,
Within its icy form. 'Tis twenty miles to yonder town
And thou art old and gray,
And thy tired limbs have done their own
With many leagues today.

"So sup with us and let the storm
Blow fierce, blow high or low,
There shall be good times by our hearth
Whatever winds may blow."
So gathering round the frugal board—
"Let us give thanks," he said,
"To God who ruleth on the storm,
Who gives the hungry bread."

The good wife sat with folded hands,
The sons with heads bowed low,
"Give us this day our daily bread,
Whatever winds may blow,
And here's to thee, thou stranger guest,
Fill us one cup the more,
There must be joy when strangers sit
Within our humble door."

Then bending to his harpsichord,

"My children, join with me,
And let us play this stormy night,
Beethoven's Symphony."
And quickly from its treasured place
Came flute and mandolin-
The daughter tuned her loved guitar,
The sons, the violin.

And soon the strains of melody
Filled all the humble room,
And sweet -toned voices answered back,
From out the gathering gloom;
And tones, deep souled with joy or pain,
Grew visible with form,
Deepening at times to other tones
Heard in the sounding storm.

And sweeter, sweeter grew the strain,
Like angels of delight,
Till heaven itself grew very near
To those who played that night;
While strange and still, the guest looked on
And wondered much to see,
A father sob and strong men weep
At their own minstrelsy.

"And are there tones on earth," he cried,
"To move men's hearts like this ?
Or was it heavenly music lent
To fill their souls with bliss ?
I, too, love music, but alas!
I hear no minstrel strain.
My ears hear not; nor laugh, nor song,
May glad my heart again.

"Give me the notes, that I may read
The tones of pathos deep; He is immortal who can write
The strains that make you weep."

He looked but once, his eyes grew dim
And quick his pulses beat,
As with a sob he tremblingly
Let fall the written sheet.

"And weep'st thou, too, thou stranger guest,"
" The wondering peasant said-
And hast not heard the master's tones,
The notes that we have played ?"
There was a pause —the stranger's face
Grew sweet in every line,
"I am Beethoven," said the guest,
"The symphony is mine."

“Just Down and Out”

He was down and out, as the saying goes,
Of hope he hadn’t a single ray,
And his wretched look and his ragged clothes,
It seemed he might have been born that way.

Discouraged ? No! It was more than that,
He had asked for a job that very day,
But the boss just looked at his shoes and hat,
No tramp for him and he turned away.

He rang the bell at a rich man’s door,
But the girl in the cap just stared and said :
“If you’d work a little, you wouldn’t be poor,
And you wouldn’t come begging around for bread.”

Yes! I knew him once, it was long ago,
As dapper a youth as there was in town,
But the fates somehow, oh, I hardly know,
Just caught him and held him and dragged him down.

And so he drifted the lonesome road,
It is so easy to drift, they say,
When you haven’t a roof for a night’s abode,
Or half a loaf for a winter’s day.

None ever asked, for they did not care,
How rags and wretchedness came about,
They only said, with an icy stare,
“That fellow yonder is down and out.”

But on a sudden a new hope came,
A woman’s voice in a tone of love,
“Look up, have courage in Christ’s sweet name,
The stars are shining somewhere above.”

Surprised, he listened, it seemed the blue

That moment shone in a clouded sky,
And the light of the sun came peeping through,
And the Christ in the woman was passing by.

I met him there on another day,
A happier soul there was not about,
And she who did in the Christ-like way,
Had saved a man who was down and out.

The Invisible Nun

Three nuns there were on a ship at sea,
And each was very fair;
But one was fairer than all the rest,
And she had golden hair.

Sweet nuns they were, and their rosaries
They counted every day;
They held their beads in their lily hands,
I would that I were they.

They were" but three," the ship -folks said,
Yet four there were, I swear;
For the fairest one I counted twice,
Because she was so fair.

I counted twice-for two she was,
Plain as the stars above;
For half of her was a sweet nun's face,
And half was a face for Love.

And ever when on the deck they came,
And low their voices fell,
The ship-folks bowed to the sisters three,
I bowed to a fourth as well.

And they are gone, with their rosaries,
Gone are the sisters three-
But half of her with the golden hair
Will stay forever with me.