

The Genesis of a National Lyric

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ANNALS OF IOWA.

EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT.

THE GENESIS OF A NATIONAL LYRIC.

In the year 1861, immediately after the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln, Hon. John A. Kasson of Des Moines, was appointed First Assistant Postmaster General—the head of the Appointment Office, under the Hon. Montgomery Blair, Post Master General. How ably Mr. Kasson seconded his chief and served his country, long ago became matters of historical record. Into biographical details, however, we do not propose to enter at this time, but merely to relate a most interesting incident in the Washington life of Mr. Kasson, which will also be fully narrated in the forthcoming "Life and Letters of John G. Whittier." Shortly after the great naval battle between the Monitor and Merrimac in Hampton Roads, Mr. Kasson, with a party of friends, steamed down the Potomac to the scene of that great conflict. As a result of what he saw, and of what he thought, he addressed letters identical in purpose, if not in words, both to Mr. Longfellow and Mr. Whittier. A copy of that to Mr. Whittier is in the possession of the Historical Department of Iowa, and the original is promised to the collection upon the publication of the Whittier book. This volume is in course of preparation by Mr. S. T. Pickard, a brother of Dr. J. L. Pickard, former President of the Iowa State University. We make no comment upon Mr. Kasson's letter, as it fully explains itself:

[*Unofficial.*]

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT, March 18, 1862.

Dear Sir:—Yesterday, with a Congressional party, I returned from Fortress Monroe, after visiting the "Monitor" and the wreck of the "Cumberland" and "Congress."

After the iron-clad "Merrimac" had passed the "Cumberland," and received her iron hail as so many peas from a popgun, she hailed her and demanded a surrender. Morris, her gallant commander, replied, "No, never!" The "Merrimac" gave her a broadside, tearing the timbers of the Cumberland with terrific force,

and receiving a tremendous, but almost harmless fire in return. Again the enemy demanded a surrender. Morris again replied, "No, never!" The "Merrimac" then drew off and plunged into the broadside of the Cumberland with her iron prow, breaking her in two, and leaving her rapidly sinking. Still her gallant crew fired gun after gun, as the water rose upon them, and as the last gun was about to be covered—the men standing in the water—it was fired at the assailing monster just as our ship disappeared in the sea. Thus the Cumberland sank beneath the waves, with many wounded, many dead, many living, on board, and, thank God, with her flag still flying in the face of the foe.

Just one week after this victory of metallic impenetrability over magnificent gallantry, I visited the scene, and sailed around the Cumberland. Her three top-masts were above the water, and at the fore we saw, with intense emotion, the glorious flag still floating upon the wind, over a waste of waters, as if the hundred souls below, sea-buried, still challenged the dastard rebels to renew the combat, for that unconquered and unconquerable flag. To such valor genius owes a tribute. It demands from the poet an Epic, or a Lyric, which shall hereafter inspire the navy with the brilliant memory of this defense and the dead who made it.

I take the liberty to call your attention (as a poet) to this incident of a war full of gallant deeds for the Union.

With high respect, your obedient servant,

JOHN A. KASSON,
First Asst. P. M. General.

JOHN G. WHITTIER, ESQ.

MR. WHITTIER'S REPLY.

22nd of March, 1862.

HON. J. A. KASSON :

I thank thee for thy striking description of the fate of the Cumberland. I read it with deep emotion.

I presume my friend Dr. Holmes will make the event the theme of one of his stirring Lyrics.

Very truly thy friend,

JOHN G. WHITTIER.

MR. LONGFELLOW'S REPLY.

CAMBRIDGE, March 26, 1862.

Dear Sir:—I have had the honor of receiving your letter, and am much obliged to you for the suggestion it contains.

That whole affair is so complete a poem in itself, that I am not sure it can be improved by rhyme.

But I thank you for the hint, and remain,

Yours truly,

HENRY W. LONGFELLOW.

JOHN A. KASSON, ESQ.

Not long after these dates Mr. Longfellow gave to the world his magnificent poem, "The Cumberland," inspired, as every reader will understand, by this graphic and stirring letter of Mr.

Kasson. The original letters of Longfellow and Whittier are now the property of the State, to which it is hoped that Mr. Kasson's letter to each of the poets may soon be added.

As a fitting conclusion to this article we copy Mr. Longfellow's familiar and very beautiful poem :

THE CUMBERLAND.

At anchor in Hampton Roads we lay,
On board of the Cumberland, sloop-of-war ;
And at times from the fortress across the bay
The alarm of drums swept past,
Or a bugle blast
From the camp on the shore.

Then far away to the south uprose,
A little feather of snow-white smoke,
And we knew that the iron ship of our foes
Was steadily steering its course
To try the force
Of our ribs of oak.

Down upon us heavily runs,
Silent and sullen, the floating fort ;
Then comes a puff of smoke from her guns,
And leaps the terrible death,
With fiery breath,
From each open port.

We are not idle, but send her straight
Defiance back in full broadside !
As hail rebounds from a roof of slate,
Rebounds our heavier hail
From each iron scale
Of the monster's hide.

"Strike your flag !" the rebel cries,
In his arrogant old plantation strain.
"Never !" our gallant Morris replies ;
"It is better to sink than to yield !"
And the whole air pealed
With the cheers of our men.

Then, like a kraken huge and black,
She crushed our ribs in her iron grasp !
Down went the Cumberland all a wrack,
With a sudden shudder of death,
And a cannon's breath
For her dying gasp.

Next morn, as the sun rose over the bay,
Still floated our flag at the main mast head ;
Lord, how beautiful was thy day !
Every waft of the air
Was a whisper of prayer,
Or a dirge for the dead.

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