

The Song "Sherman's March to the Sea. "

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THE SONG "SHERMAN'S MARCH TO THE SEA."

BY CHARLES ALDRICH.

[Charles Aldrich prepared many statements upon men and events of interest in the record of our State which had not been published at the time of his death. His habit of accumulating what he called "side lights" on great men and events is well known and illustrated in numerous of his editorial paragraphs in the ANNALS and the various newspapers with which he was connected. One of these "side lights" that did not reach the columns of the ANNALS while he lived is presented herewith.—Editor.]

Only the other day¹ at Washington City a grand equestrian monument was dedicated to Sherman, the Leader of the March to the Sea. The monument was placed on the very spot where the great commander stood at the close of the war and beheld his veteran armies of the west march down Pennsylvania Avenue. It was one of the world's great days, that day of the Review in 1865. This later day—of the unveiling of the statue—at Washington was also a great day, for the President and his cabinet and a multitude of soldiers and notable men were present. One of the bas-reliefs of the monument is a representation of "Sherman's March to the Sea." The ceremony at the monument recalls the story of how the great march got its name.

It was an Iowa man languishing in prison at Columbia, South Carolina, who, keeping step in prison to the far-off bugle sound of Sherman's army, was inspired to write a song. A negro had carried into the prison, secreted in a loaf of bread, the great news of Sherman's tramp from Atlanta oceanward. It was a little Columbia newspaper, done up into a wad not bigger than a lady's thimble, but between its troubled lines the prisoners had read of how Atlanta, Milledgeville, Savannah, and everything else in Georgia had fallen before the boys in blue. That night the song of "Sherman's March to the

¹October 15, 1903.

Sea" was penned by Adjutant S. H. M. Byers of the Fifth Iowa Infantry. He little dreamed it then, but the name he gave the campaign passed into history for a thousand years.

There was an accomplished glee club in the prison, led by Major John H. Isett of the Eighth Iowa Cavalry, and one afternoon the great crowd of men in the prison were electrified and moved to their hearts' depths by the singing of the glee club when it reached the song of "Sherman's March to the Sea." Major Isett was the first who ever sang the song. The obscure author of the words instantly became a hero among his comrades. A fellow prisoner named W. O. Rockwell had composed the music for the poem, though later it had a dozen settings in the North. It was carried through the lines to the Union army by Lieutenant D. W. Tower, also an Iowa man, who had secreted it in a wooden leg. There it was instantly adopted by the soldiers. A million copies of it were sold at the close of the war, and the great campaign had got its name forever. It brought the author little money, but much repute and not a few advantages. It led to an occasion by which he escaped from prison. It gave him a position on the Commander's Staff, and led to the lifelong friendship of him who marched to the sea.

As the war was closing he was offered a position in the regular army, but declined the honor. In its place he accepted the consulship tendered him at Sherman's request by President Grant. It is recalled how Grant, as he was signing the commission, laughingly said, with a twinkle in his eye, "Well, Sherman, here it is, and I expect a certain song had lots to do with it." Sherman only smiled.

The author went abroad, and as consul, consul-general and acting minister, served under five presidents. He won a high record at the department of state, just as he had won a high record with his regiment in the army.

All his leisure abroad was spent in writing for the best magazines in this country. He also published books, both in prose and verse. Critics have pronounced numbers of his war poems the best of their kind written since the great rebellion. His

love and sentimental poems received high approbation from the poets Whittier, Holmes and Story.

In recent years Major Byers has been living quietly in his beautiful home "St. Helens," at Des Moines, his time occupied with an occasional magazine article, a poem or a book. It is a life of taste and beautiful though not indolent ease.

General Sherman, in his Memoirs, gives a succinct account of the receipt by him of the copy of this song, which was very famous at the close of the war and for some years afterward, and is even now often sung or recited. While describing his entry at the head of his army into the city of Columbia, S. C., he writes:

About this time I noticed several men trying to get through the crowd to speak with me, and called to some black people to make room for them; when they reached me they explained that they were officers of our army, who had been prisoners, had escaped from the rebel prison and guard, and were of course overjoyed to find themselves safe with us. I told them that, as soon as things settled down, they should report to General Howard, who would provide for their safety, and enable them to travel with us. One of them handed me a paper, asking me to read it at my leisure; I put it in my breast pocket and rode on. * * * * After we had got, as it were, settled in Blanton Duncan's house, say about 2:00 P. M., I overhauled my pocket according to custom, to read more carefully the various notes and memoranda received during the day, and found the paper which had been given me, as described, by one of our escaped prisoners. It proved to be the song of "Sherman's March to the Sea," which had been composed by Adjutant S. H. M. Byers, of the Fifth Iowa Infantry, when a prisoner in the asylum at Columbia, which had been beautifully written off by a fellow-prisoner and handed to me in person. This appeared to me so good that I at once sent for Byers, attached him to my staff, provided him with horse and equipment, and took him as far as Fayetteville, North Carolina, whence he was sent to Washington as bearer of dispatches.²

²Memoirs of Gen. W. T. Sherman, v. II.; p. 281-3.

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