

THE POEMS OF FATHER ABRAM J. RYAN.

PERHAPS no element in the poetry of Father Ryan—it we except the spiritual—is more strongly marked than his intense Southern patriotism. In fact, he has been designated the poet of the "Lost Cause." Into hearts and homes made desolate by the waste and fire of that long and terrible civil strife, the muse of the poet-priest found ready entrance in the stirring lays and dirges of lament commemorative of Southern glory and Southern valour. It is not our purpose in this paper to discuss the righteousness of that war from either the aspect of slavery or the sovereignty of states' rights, but we cannot shut our eyes to the heroism that was displayed by the Southerners, nor the proud dignity with which they accepted defeat. Father Ryan's heart was both tender and brave. In the hour of danger he went forth as a chaplain to the boys in grey the Confederate soldiers. The patriotism of his fellow-countrymen had burned into his soul. His young brother, a captain in the ranks, yielded up his life for his country. Father Ryan has enshrined his memory in one of his most stirring and pathetic poems. It is so fine a composition that we are loth to mar it by extracts. Take the following description of the battle. Full of intense fire and energy, it has scarcely an equal in any language:—

"Lo! yon flag of freedom flashing
In the sunny Southern sky:
On—to death and glory dashing,
On—where swords are clanging, clashing,
On—where balls are crushing, crashing,
On—'mid perils dread, appalling,
On—they're falling, falling, falling,
On—they're growing fewer, fewer,
On—their hearts beat all the truer,
On—on—on—no fear, no falter,
On—though round the battle-altar,
There were wounded victims moaning,
There were dying soldiers groaning;
On—right on—death's danger braving,
Warring where their flag was waving,
While Baptismal-blood was laving
All that field of death and slaughter;
On—still on—that bloody laver
Made them braver, and made them braver:
On—with never a halt or waver,—
On in battle—bleeding, bounding,
While the glorious shout swept sounding
We will win the day or die."

Again we have a beautiful touch of pathos wedded to delicate tenderness of description at the close of "In Memoriam," where the poet-priest describes the finding of his dying brother on the battle field:

"When the twilight sadly, slowly,
Wrapped its mantle o'er them all,
Thousands—thousands lying lowly,
Hushed in silence deep and holy,—
There was one,—his blood was flowing
And his last of life was going,—
And his pulse faint—fainter beating
Told his hours were few and fleeting—
And his brow grew white and whiter,
While his eyes grew strangely brighter,—
There he lay—like infant dreaming,
With his sword beside him leaning—
For the hand in life, that grasped it
True, in death, still fondly clasped it;
There his comrades found him lying
'Mid the heaps of dead and dying,
And the sternest bent down weeping,
O'er the lonely sleeper sleeping:
'Twas the midnight; stars shone round him,
And they told us how they found him
Where the bravest love to fall.

Where the woods like banners bending,
Drooped in starlight and in gloom,—
There, when that sad night was ending,
And the faint far dawn was blending
With the stars now fast descending,—
There—they mute and mournful bore him—
And they laid him down—so tender—
And the next day's sun in splendor
Flashed above my brother's tomb."

How accurately, too, does "The Conquered Banner" voice the wailing and broken soul of the south when, at the close of the unhappy war the Southern banner, that had so oft led its hosts to victory, now was "drooping weary," with its staff "broken and shattered." The metre of this poem is particularly felicitous. It was written at the termination of the terrible strife, and attracted widespread attention, giving its author at once a prominent place among the poets of America. Owing, however, to the intensity of Southern patriotism in Father Ryan's poems, the poet of the "Lost Cause" has never received justice at the hands of New England critics,—a small coterie of whom, as in the days of Edgar Allan Poe, fancy that they alone have a right to the inspiration of song. Had Father Ryan lived in Massachusetts, and been a product of the Mayflower, every magazine published from Portland to New York would be teeming with tributes to his gifted pen; but it was his lot to be born under sunny skies, which kindled in his soul the pulse of love for the South. Tennyson is a guinea-a-liner, a laureate, and a peer by grace of genius and royal favour, and yet he has written no poem of the same character at all equal to the "Conquered Banner." Neither subtlety of thought nor philosophy, nor doubt, nor obscurity, can produce such a poem. The "Conquered Banner" is a spark from the fire of true genius, and is worth in point of poetic merit five dozen such poems as are nurtured in the literary hothouses of Boston. When the clouds of prejudice and passion shall have rolled away, the warmth of genial and honest criticism will evoke from the great literary heart of America tributes of high praise for the genius-gifted, pure-hearted author of these lines:

THE CONQUERED BANNER.

Furl that Banner, for 'tis weary;
Round its staff 'tis drooping dreary:
Furl it, fold it, it is best:
For there's not a man to wave it,
And there's not a soul to save it,
And there's not one left to lave it
In the blood which heroes gave it;
And its foes now scorn and brave it;
Furl it, hide it,—let it rest.

Take that Banner down, 'tis tattered;
Broken is its staff and shattered:
And the valiant hosts are scattered
Over whom it floated high.
Oh! 'tis hard for us to fold it:
Hard to think there's none to hold it;
Hard that those, who once unrolled it,
Now must furl it with a sigh.

Furl that Banner—furl it sadly;
Once ten thousands hailed it gladly,
And ten thousands wildly, madly,
Swore it should forever wave;
Swore that foeman's sword should never
Hearts like theirs entwined dis sever,
Till that float should float forever
O'er their freedom, or their grave!

Furl it! for the hands that grasped it,
And the hearts that fondly clasped it,
Cold and dead are lying low;
And that Banner—it is trailing!
While around it sounds the wailing
Of its people in their woe.

For, though conquered, they adore it!
Love the cold, dead hands that bore it!
Weep for those who fell before it!
Pardon those who trailed and tore it!
But, oh! wildly they deplore it,
Now who furl and fold it so.

Furl that Banner! True, 'tis gory,
Yet 'tis wreathed around with glory,
And 'twill live in song and story,
Though its folds are in the dust:
For its fame on brightest pages,
Penned by poets and by sages,
Shall go sounding down the ages—
Furl its folds though now we must.