

## And Pen

One night in December, 1864, a young officer from an Iowa regiment paced back and forth in a prison pen at Columbia, South Carolina; it was too cold to sleep in the little tents, the only shelter then provided for most of the captured Union officers in the prison. For sixteen months this man had been shut away from the news of the war, except for the few reports — many of them false — which were occasionally smuggled into the prisons.

Recently, however, good news had come to the tattered and disease-plagued prisoners in the high walled yard of the old lunatic asylum at Columbia. Newspapers, hidden in loaves of bread by a colored friend, had brought the news of Sherman's daring campaign from Atlanta to Savannah. With the keen imagination of the poet, the young soldier visualized the encampment, the surprising order of General Sherman, the march, the battles, the victorious entry into Savannah. As he walked, cold and hungry, but exultant, words came to fit his mood, and there took form in his mind the title and some of the words of a song — "Sherman's March to the Sea". The next day he



remained in the tent on the little pile of straw  
which served as a bed and completed the verses.

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 wearisome 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 traitor 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  
As Sherman marched down to the sea.

O! proud was our army that morning  
That stood where the pine darkly towers,  
When Sherman said: "Boys, you are weary,  
This day 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 writer was Adjutant Samuel H. M. Byers, of the Fifth Iowa Infantry. It happened that Lieutenant Rockwell, also a prisoner, was a composer of music. Borrowing a copy of the poem he carried it to his sleeping place under the hospital building and set it to music. The prison also had a Glee Club which was permitted to give a program in the afternoons from the porch of the hospital, provided they sang an equal number of Southern songs. One drizzly afternoon the leader announced that they had a new song and the men sang "Sherman's March to the Sea". It met an enthusiastic reception in the prisons; and before long Lieutenant Daniel W. Tower of the Seventeenth Iowa Infantry, upon his exchange, carried a copy out of the Cahawba Prison in Alabama,



concealed in his wooden leg. Byers became widely known as the writer of a popular song hit.

The close of the Civil War, however, left Byers uncertain as to his future, and the first years of peace must have been difficult and uncertain for him as they were for tens of thousands of other men who had to adjust themselves to peaceful pursuits after years in the army. He was nearly twenty-eight years of age, with health seriously impaired by the hardships of army and prison life. What he found to do during the first months of peace and freedom is not recorded. Apparently there was at first no thought of a literary career.

In 1868 Byers wrote his first prose work, a small volume entitled *What I Saw in Dixie; or Sixteen Months in Rebel Prisons*. This consisted largely of selections from a diary kept from the time of the capture of Vicksburg to the end of the war. It was dedicated to "Edward Edwards, the old slave of Columbia, South Carolina, who aided me in my escape".

One of the descriptions in this little volume recalls the story of Nero and the burning of Rome. When the Confederate troops withdrew from Columbia, they set fire to some stores of cotton and when the Union troops entered the capital city they found many buildings already burning. The victorious army, irrestrainable after months of



fighting and foraging, looted the wine cellars of the wealthy planters, and the city became a pandemonium. Fires, both accidental and intentional, raged everywhere. Distracted citizens removed the furniture from their houses, hoping to save something from the flames, but in the confusion it was impossible to move the larger pieces. Beautiful rosewood pianos stood unprotected in the streets and occasionally drunken soldiers stopped to play them, the music only adding to the wild discord, the whole scene lighted by the glare of the burning city.

More than forty years later, Major Byers, as he was then known, wrote a more extended account of his war experiences in the book which he called *With Fire and Sword*. Like the earlier volume this is gripping description of life in the Union army and in Southern prisons. Both books are unusually vivid and the reader sees war, even though he may have had no experience with which to assimilate the tragic events.

Listen to Byers as he tells in a few words the story of his recapture by the two Confederate cavalry officers. "The captain rode a dozen yards or so ahead, with a revolver in his hand. I trudged along in the sand at his side, faithfully hanging on to his stirrup strap. The lieutenant and Fritchie followed us in a like manner in the



moonlight. It seems to have been a romantic occasion, when I think of it now; we two Federals and these two Confederates, there alone in the moonlight, and the big pine trees and the white sands about." Perhaps it took a poet to see romance in a bitter disappointment.

A third volume of prose dealing with the Civil War, and perhaps the most important from the standpoint of history, is *Iowa in War Times*, published in 1888, during the interim in Byers's consular service. This is a history of the Civil War activities of the State of Iowa, Iowa regiments, and Iowa men, written in a clear, matter-of-fact style.

In later years, Byers wrote a number of articles for the *Annals of Iowa*, reminiscent of his war or pre-war experience. Among these were "How Men Feel in Battle; Recollections of a Private at Champion Hills" and "Recollections of Slave Days".

In the meantime, the soldier had become the diplomat. In 1869, the year following the publication of his first book, Major Byers was appointed United States Consul at Zurich, Switzerland, and on July 23rd, he and his newly married wife, Margaret Gilmour Byers, sailed on the *City of London* for Europe. He remained in Switzerland until July, 1884, when he was sent to Italy as



Consul General, but less than a year later he was replaced by a Democrat. In 1891 President Harrison reappointed him Consul General in Switzerland, but his appointment ended with the second administration of President Cleveland and in 1893 Major and Mrs. Byers returned to America and established a home at Des Moines, Iowa, which they named St. Helens, in memory of the little daughter who had died in Switzerland.

His consular service gave Major Byers new experiences and some leisure for writing. *Switzerland and the Swiss* was first published anonymously in 1875, because the rules of the State Department prohibit the publication of such commentaries by men in the service. A second edition, however, was published under the author's name. "The Swiss Rhine", published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in April, 1880; "The Lake Dwellers", a study of archeological discoveries near Zurich, which appeared in *Harper's* in February, 1890; and "A Forgotten Republic" (St. Gall), which appeared in the *Magazine of American History* for December, 1891, are some of the magazine articles based on his travels in Switzerland. These were descriptive and historical.

Major Byers appears to have violated the rule against published comments by foreign service



officials at least once. Convinced that some localities in Europe were systematically shipping their paupers to the United States, he wrote a letter denouncing the policy, which was published in the *New York Tribune* on November 12, 1880. It caused a huge ripple in the diplomatic sea, and nearly cost Byers his position. He was officially reprimanded — and personally commended — and the charge was dropped.

After his retirement from the consular service, Major Byers devoted himself mainly to literary work. In 1900 he published *Twenty Years in Europe*, a chatty volume based largely on his journal and correspondence, containing more than fifty personal letters from General W. T. Sherman with whom Byers had formed a close and enduring friendship.

Although most of the prose work of Major Byers was based on his war experiences or on information secured during his travels, he occasionally deviated from these fields. "Good Things from Dr. Johnson" in the *Magazine of American History* for October, 1891, and *A Layman's Life of Jesus*, published in 1912, are examples of these wider interests.

Major Byers is perhaps best known, however, as a poet. The story of "Sherman's March to the Sea" has already been told. Whether he had at-



tempted to write poetry before he was a prisoner of war is not known, but apparently he tried verse making as a diversion in the prison for on December 15, 1863, soon after he reached Libby Prison, he wrote to a friend at home in the manner of Hosea Biglow.

Well, William! my boy, 'tis in prison I thank ye;  
They've got me, at last, just for being a Yankee!

In spite of the success of his famous lyric, it was not until 1884 that Major Byers published his first collection of poems, *The Happy Isles, and Other Poems*. This volume took its title from the poem written in commemoration of his daughter.

So with new eyes I saw, and from afar  
Heard sweetest tones, and in the rosy west  
Where they had left the golden gates ajar,  
That she might come to give my spirit rest,  
I looked and saw the Islands of the Blest.

Many of the poems in this volume were written in a light or romantic vein. One of these, "If You Want a Kiss, Why, Take It", was often copied.

After Major Byers retired from the consular service, he devoted himself almost entirely to literary work. In 1896, he published a collection of war poems entitled *The March to the Sea*, probably his best work. This included the original lyric which had made Byers famous in 1865, and



contained in addition many poems describing the varied aspects of the expedition, and portraying very successfully the various moods of the participants — soldiers, civilians, enemies, and slaves. These run the gamut from the rollicking

Then here's to the bummer who longest can ride,  
A sheep on his shoulder, his gun at his side.  
And to every brave fellow who goes on before  
To forage good food for the grand army corps.

to the poignant, haunting refrain which expresses the awe and joy of the slaves who heard the news of Sherman's advance:

Last night I heard the whippoorwill,  
Good-bye;  
I think I hear his sweet voice still,  
Good-bye, plantation.  
An angel brought some good news round,  
Good-bye;  
Oh, don't you hear the joyful sound?  
Good-bye, plantation.

. . .  
Oh, make your garments clean and white,  
Good-bye;  
Great news has come to you this night,  
Good-bye, plantation.  
Oh, Massa Linkum, make us free,  
Good-bye;  
Oh, let us hail the jubilee,  
Good-bye, plantation.



Major Byers has published several other collections of poems, among them *The Honeymoon and Other Poems*; *Poems of S. H. M. Byers*; and *The Pony Express*.

During the later years, he has made his home at Los Angeles, California. Long years have passed since the young officer, huddled in the tent in the prison yard, laboriously wrote out the words of the war song, "Sherman's March to the Sea". One by one his comrades have dropped out of the ranks and the death of his only son, Lawrence Marshall Byers, has brought sorrow and disappointment. In spite of this, Major Byers has felt the glamour and romance of the Spanish regime and he has written a number of poems recalling the days of Spanish friars, the tolling of the convent and monastery bells, the galloping of senors and señoritas along El Camino Real. Among his poems of California are "The Bells of Capistrano" and "In Arcadia: A Legend of San Luis Rey". Although he is now in his ninety-fifth year, Major Byers still writes poems for the Los Angeles *Times*.

At least three of his best-known poems relate to Iowa, his adopted State. One of these is the "Song of Iowa" which he wrote in 1897, using the old tune "Der Tannenbaum", to which the Maryland detachment had paraded in front of Libby



Prison long ago. "The Launching of the *Iowa*" was read in March, 1896. In October of the same year he read his poem "Iowa" at Burlington as part of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the admission of Iowa as a State. Here Byers tells the story of the prairie Commonwealth — the sea, the glaciers, the discovery, the Indians, the pioneers — Iowa.

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