



William Henry Thompson

(1848-1918)

The High Tide at Gettysburg (1888)

A cloud possessed the hollow field,  
The gathering battle's smoky shield.  
    Athwart the gloom the lightning flashed,  
    And through the cloud some horsemen dashed,  
And from the heights the thunder pealed.

Then at the brief command of Lee  
Moved out that matchless infantry,  
    With Pickett leading grandly down,  
    To rush against the roaring crown  
Of those dread heights of destiny.

Far heard above the angry guns  
A cry across the tumult runs,--  
    The voice that rang through Shiloh's woods  
    And Chickamauga's solitudes,  
The fierce South cheering on her sons!

Ah, how the withering tempest blew  
Against the front of Pettigrew!  
    A Khamsin wind that scorched and singed  
    Like that infernal flame that fringed  
The British squares at Waterloo!

A thousand fell where Kemper led;  
A thousand died where Garnett bled:  
    In blinding flame and strangling smoke  
    The remnant through the batteries broke  
And crossed the works with Armistead.

'Once more in Glory's van with me!'  
Virginia cried to Tennessee;  
    'We two together, come what may,  
    Shall stand upon these works to-day!'

(The reddest day in history.)

Brave Tennessee! In reckless way  
Virginia heard her comrade say:  
    'Close round this rent and riddled rag!'  
    What time she set her battle-flag  
Amid the guns of Doubleday.

But who shall break the guards that wait  
Before the awful face of Fate?  
    The tattered standards of the South  
    Were shriveled at the cannon's mouth,  
And all her hopes were desolate.

In vain the Tennessean set  
His breast against the bayonet!  
    In vain Virginia charged and raged,  
    A tigress in her wrath uncaged,  
Till all the hill was red and wet!

Above the bayonets, mixed and crossed,  
Men saw a gray, gigantic ghost  
    Receding through the battle-cloud,  
    And heard across the tempest loud  
The death-cry of a nation lost!

The brace went down! Without disgrace  
They leaped to Ruin's red embrace.  
    They only heard Fame's thunders wake,  
    And saw the dazzling sun-burst break  
In smiles on Glory's bloody face!

They fell, who lifted up a hand  
And bade the sun in heaven to stand!  
    They smote and fell, who set the bars  
    Against the progress of the stars,  
And stayed the march of Motherland!

They stood, who saw the future come  
On through the fight's delirium!  
    They smote and stood, who held the hope  
    Of nations on that slippery slope  
Amid the cheers of Christendom.

God lives! He forged the iron will  
That clutched and held that trembling hill.  
    God lives and reigns! He built and lent  
    The heights for Freedom's battlement  
Where floats her flag in triumph still!

Fold up the banners! Smelt the guns!  
Love rules. Her gentler purpose runs.  
    A mighty mother turns in tears  
    The pages of her battle years,  
Lamenting all her fallen sons!