



A poem by **Caroline Atherton Mason** (1823-90), written after witnessing soldiers coming home on August 24, 1863;

ON THE RETURN OF THE REGIMENT

When ancient warriors from the blood-red field
Returned victorious with unsullied shield,
A grateful populace flocked out to meet
And crown their heroes in the public street.
Amid great shouts and acclamations sweet.

Dear friends, we weave no chapters fresh and bright –
To bind upon your conquering brows tonight;
We bring no victorious crowns nor shining bays –
Only the tribute of our honest praise!
Sweet is a nation's plaudit – sweeter far
The need of praise where friends and kindred are.

It needs no trick of art, nor studied rules,
No painted words, nor rhetoric taught in schools,
To syllable the welcome we would speak,
Yet language fails us; it is too poor, too weak,
To utter all our welcoming lips would say;
But what lips fail to utter, faces may.

Then welcome home! There's many a hearth lit up
To greet your coming; many a brimming cup
That "cheers but not inebriates," is poured
To hail your advent – at the social board
Who minds the price of tea when people come
Who for nine months have been away from home –
Drinking – the fiends know what? – then let it flow
Ad libitum, the generous tea! – although,
Of this grave order, ask a son or daughter,
Of course we'd give the preference to cold water.

That is, of course, we'd have it understood –
Other things equal, why, of course, we should!
Ah, by the way, what sort of stuff is that
They dub cold water on the river – flat –
By Mississippi's royal stream? – alas
That lips we love should drain so foul a glass!
A mess conglomerate of mud and slime!
Poor souls! How you have longed, full many a time –
For a full cup from the bright streams that flowed
by your own doors at home – a sweeter draught
Than ever Bacchus brewed or quaffed.

Oh dear New England! Sacred on her hills
Her gurgling springs that pour their laughing rills
In streams of music to the poor man's door;
Who quaffs drinks health, and is no longer poor!

We wander – but returning, Lake again
Our key-note of sweet welcome; yet the strain
Has other chords less joyous. Sadness blends
E'en with our welcome, oh beloved friends!
We miss glad faces. Sickness, Death have passed
And thinned your numbers since we saw you last –
God's love restore our sick ones! But for him
Whom love can ne'er restore, our eyes grow dim.

Thy memory in our hearts shall bloom
Bright as the flowers Love plants above the tomb.

Not from the battle-field his life went up,
In sight of home he drank the bitter cup;
But for his country and his kin he died.

Let us forget our sorrow in our pride;
Let us thank God that one of us was found
Worthy of lot so sacred, so renounced.

Oh if there be a grave revered and blest
'Tis where a Christian Patriot makes his rest –
There let the bright sun shed its earliest gleams,
There linger longest – in its parting beams.
There troops of happy birds on painted wing,
Trill their sweet descants in the early spring
There wintry snows fall purest summer there
Yield its first-blossoms and its balmiest air
And autumn bring its wealth of golden bloom
And crimson leaves to decorate the tomb;
And grateful loving hands o'erplant the spot –
With shining laurel and forget-me-not;
There Love resort to smile as well as weep
Saying "'Tis well his memory we will keep,
'Tis well; He giveth his beloved sleep." ■

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This **BONFIRE BROADSIDE** presented in April 2023 at the Poets of the Past reading hosted by the Stratton Players, the Fitchburg Historical Society, Bonfire Bookshop, and InTown Fitchburg. 'Return of the Regiment', forgotten for more than a century, was uncovered and transcribed by Sally Cragin during archival research at the Society in 2022. The author was one of Fitchburg's most acclaimed writers. She is best known for the poem "Do They Miss Me Tonight", which she wrote as a student and which later became a popular song during the Civil War. Broadside designed by @zakbos using Bembo and Whitney typefaces, with an illustration created with @openai software. Published by @bonfirepress in numbered series.

