

SONGS OF THE SOLDIER BOYS

Bands, Buglers and Songs Recalled by Captain King.

STIRRING MUSIC OF THE WAR DAYS

The Halcyon Days Along the Potomac in 'Sixty-One—Regimental Bands at Chain Bridge—A Concourse of Sweet Sounds.

We were talking the other night of the songs we sang and the music we most enjoyed while McClellan was organizing the army around Washington in '61, and matters were at least so comparatively quiet on the Potomac that, except when out on picket duty, there was time and inclination for music. I doubt if there was a better place to observe the writes in style, subject or composition, writes Captain King in the St. Louis Republic, than among the wooded heights overlooking Chain Bridge along about the end of September, for right there within rifle shot of one another were encamped regiments representing almost every state from Maine to the Mississippi. Even California was represented, but rather by name than in fact, for the "First California," commanded by Colonel and Senator Baker—so soon to lay down his gallant life at Ball's Bluff—was practically recruited in New York and Pennsylvania, and largely of colored men and sent to the middle west. Oddly enough, too, the fortunes of war had marched that very regiment, under its brilliant commander, straight across the Potomac and halted it in the thick forest, side by side with the Seventy-ninth (Highland) of New York, at that moment commanded by Colonel Isaac L. Stevens, who, as governor of Washington territory and its delegate in congress, had become a bitter political opponent of Oregon's senator, Baker, who was one of the Lincoln associates and political advisers. There were two or three days of "strained relations," for both men were eminent citizens and emphatic fighters. Then Mr. Lincoln solved the problem forced upon him by the division of command by the mere ignorance of the old-time differences between Baker and Stevens. He settled the vexed question in his own inimitable way and to the comfort and satisfaction of both parties, a thing only Mr. Lincoln had the faculty or the power of doing. He promoted Colonel Stevens to the grade of brigadier general on September 28, and sent him to an important command at Port Royal, S. C., leaving Baker in possession of the field and his colonel's eagle. Within the week each met the soldier's fate—Baker killed at Ball's Bluff, Stevens at Chantilly.

But there was music of another kind—an inspiring kind—along the heights at Chain Bridge day in and day out, and it is this I want to speak. Every regiment had its "motif," its marching song, good, some so good, some positively bad. And every regiment had its own drum and fife corps, and all day long it seemed to me those bands and those corps of "field music" were at practice. The air which with the march, the drumming, the course, the first regiments to leap to the front as the echo of Sumter's shotted guns aroused the north—the Sixth and Eighth of Massachusetts and New York's famous Seventh—had their own fine bands, admirably equipped with instruction, instrumentation and equipment. For weeks, indeed, after that memorable afternoon in April when the Seventh strode away to the Cortlandt street ferry, every man and boy who could whistle or sing was piping their famous quickstep. "Skyrocket" was the composition of their old leader, Grafula. But the Seventh was recalled at the end of their thirty days, went home and was mustered out as gray-clad privates and corporals, and reappeared in some 900 or more numbers as commissioned officers, either in the regulars or volunteers. The three-months men were rushing to the front then and before Bull Run was fought many of the "three-year" regiments had been mustered in and were ready for duty. Even among these there came some capital bands, those from the western states being without exception the old-fashioned brass or cornet bands, while in some cases the eastern bands were made up of both brass and string instruments. For a few weeks, when the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Massachusetts were brigaded with us westerners at Kalamazoo hill, we had delightful music every evening, for the bands of the Fifth Wisconsin and the Sixth Massachusetts, the "Brooklyn Phalanx" and later the Nineteenth Massachusetts were really fine, but not until Baldy Smith's Vermonters seized the heights on the Virginia shore at Chain Bridge and our brigade went to the north. This was the first move, not until our force of a dozen regiments from all over the north was camped about the bold and romantic shores, did we realize how much there was to army music, whether of full band, fife and drum, battery bugle or cavalry trumpet.

It was considered a great thing in those days to have a drum major or a veteran fifer who had been through the Mexican war and was master of all the old army service calls and marching tunes. We enjoyed our bands, of course, and looked forward with eagerness to the afternoon concert, for regularly every fair day, when 4 o'clock came around, the really good bands would be assembled for the task, and the Potomac seemed to be in a flood of martial melody. First the band of the Sixth Maine would strike up and favor us with some stirring quickstep. Then, over by General Smith's headquarters on the roadside north of the new fortification (for Ethan Allen and Marcy), the band of the Third Vermont would chime in with another the instant the echoes of the first had died away, and before the applause for their efforts was stifled our own "silver cornets of the Fifth Wisconsin would be uplifted, and the woods would ring again. And so it went through those dreary, hazy autumn days, when the army was "getting on a good ready" and being drilled and disciplined for the task at hand. It was a long time, but the three brigades presently assembled there about Chain Bridge were in the thick of light after fight and the band men had something far more trying to do than tooting for our entertainment. By the time the third year came around some of these enthusiastic regiments were not much bigger than the bands behind which they had so joyously and proudly trumpeted across the Potomac—that is, not counting the recruits sent forward to fill the gaps rent by battle and disease. And then came the order limiting the number of musicians and mustering out all the bands except one in each brigade.

And the field music—the drummers and fifers, the buglers and trumpeters—had we always, and, after all, the music that seemed to make the most lasting impression and to be most intimately associated with soldiers' life was that which gave us, a thrill never forgotten—the marching of the new fortifications along the wooded heights overlooking the Chain Bridge.

Already the autumn frosts had begun to touch the woods with the tints of the foliage, with crimson and gold. The mists billowed upward from the silent reaches of the stream and its bordering canal, and hung like some fleecy drapery about the shores. Over on the Virginia side the great masses of the forest in camp or bycamps, while the reserves were still occupying for drill purposes the broad plateau north of the bridge. They used to rout us out bright and early in those days—the cooks first, an hour before the dawn, so that there might be coffee ready for every man—"stand off" against the malaria. Then, just as the first faint flush of coming morn could be traced upon the eastern sky, the corporals of the guard would come raiding through the company grounds turning out the drummers and fifers and getting hastily danned by many a growler for making so much noise about it as to disturb their comrades of the ranks. And then in their shoddy great coats the boys would gather under the foot of the drum major and the "batter heads" and blow through their fifes, and then, all of a sudden, as it began to grow light enough to see across the valley, somebody would lead drive up near the Vermont brigade headquarters, and in less than a minute would come the Sixth Maine tumbling up from its blankets to the plaintive notes of "Willie, We Have Missed You," the Second Wisconsin swearing at the racket of a thundering performance of "Yankee Doodle," the Highlanders turning out to the tune of "Bonnie Dundee," the Californians across the ravine shouting the choruses of "Finnegan's Wake." Over on the eastern ramparts of the new fort the Nineteenth Indiana boys attempting an artistic performance of "The Dawn of the Day," which neat and appropriate effort was drowned out by those monotonous ruffles of the Fifth Wisconsin howling in unison with their fifes and drums the touching cords of that classic ditty, "Joe Bowers."

At last I got a letter from my dear brother that came from old Missouri and all the way from Pike.

Up on the heights of Mott's buglers were braying. "Can't get 'em up; I can't get 'em in the morning, and over the plateau of the Sixth Wisconsin talk about the Siegfried "motif"—the signal of his bugle horn that is carried through all the grand music of the Wagner operas—why, ever since the Mexican war every drum and fife corps in the army of the north has been hammering away in "two-four time" at a quickstep that in their exact order contains the notes of that Siegfried bugle call, and the Sixth Wisconsin played it day after day in 1861, and every fife in Yankee-land knew it. "When This War Was Over," "Kiss Me, Mother," "Mother, I've Come Home to Die," and a "raft" of other lugubrious ditties were the soldier's songs around the camp fires, and the battle hymn of the republic was best known to the army of the north in the words "the boys so loved to sing—"John Brown's Body."

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