

A Poem

Read before the "Soldier's Lyceum of the 11th NY Battery"
At the Eighth regular Meeting, Oct 29th 1864.
By G. H. Vandenberg.

The author of this poem was killed at Cold Harbor June 12, 1864.

THE TREE OF LIBERTY.

We write, of that small band who long ago -
Went out adventurous on the raging sea,
To seek more genial sphere, - where where freedom to enjoy,
And conscience, - with its high prerogative, to guide
In all the ways of life, might be obtained,
With none to check, or bend the human mind,
To other's will. -

Of their doings - and results that consequent came on,
In course of time, to make the world, no matter high, or low,
Look on and stand amazed; -
A band who wrought, what ages long before,
Would call super-natural; high; beyond; -
Age - far exceeding mortal power.

A tree was plant' in distant land, till then unknown,
By all the race of men - who learned in books -
Or labored, working with the hands, in fields -
Or sought adventure in a distant region,
Far remote from all the country known, -
A tree of beauty, and like the land, its life sustained,
It was unknown, nor ever had before exist' on earth,
- Next to the trees that long ago, by higher hands,
And in a fairer soil were plant' (in Eden's soil)
It stood, and emblem was of freedom, -
And equal rights to man, as heaven ordained,
And grew, and spread its branches wide, -
O'er all the land, from east to west; and North; and South;
And fruit, and flowers, upon its branches hung -

And beauties were indeed to look upon,
And cool the, shade beneath, which to rest;
While gentle zephyrs soft, beneath its branches blew,
To fan the weary peasant's heated brow.
Upon its top, high, up in air, an eagle,
Native of the mountain oak, who reigneth,
Queen among the mountain birds, was placed,
For ages; centuries; long lengths of time,
Till the last sun shall rise and set,
To guard the tree, and sentinel—and ensign be,
To rally those who dwell in peace
And safely ate, and drank, and slept;
And woke to admire the grand old tree,
And should a foe approach to give her world's scream!
That those who shelter took beneath her boughs,
Who planted there with arduous toil
And nourished long, and faithfully, a tree,
To show to all the world, how peaceful they might dwell,
Who free; would worship God,
Might come at once, to rescue; and secure,
Not only to themselves, but all that after came,
The 'importance so dear so precious.
The world moved on, and many slept,
(As all must die, and pay the debt to nature owed by all)
Of those whose hands employed
To rear the favorite tree; example to the world,
They slept beneath her shade,
And summer birds, sang elegy at eve,
While perched upon her boughs,
Above the sleeping dead.—
And seasons came, and went,
And with them grew each twig,
And wider spread each branch

Till land and sea, was compassed far,
And all the world looked on,
And great amazement seized,
The Nations of the Earth—of every clime,
The old in peace, in toil the middle-aged,
In sport and innocence, the youths, were all eyes,
Nor thought of other days,
Nor aught of ill or harm forebode
Complacently, upon the past they glance,
Then futurward, with sanguine hope they look,
From storm, and gathering tempest-shield,
Secured in all their rights, they peaceful dwell,
— — — — — But is perfection found on earth?
And do men's fabrics rear that ne'er shall fall?
Is man ordained, in sunshine here below,
To bask through all his days?
And never rear behind his eye, or cloud, his sun obscure?
Or nations priding in themselves, with heaven-daring boast?
To think themselves so great, that shame is covered up by this,
No matter what they do?
Come forth and see the fairest to be seen
The tree was beautiful every twig, and smooth,
And straight; with perfect form, — and beautiful the leaves —
And sweet the blossoms were, to look upon, —
Or of its odour, to inhale — the fruit delicious, abundant to
Give health to all who might partake, —
Its roots were deep, and spreading wide —
Nor easy to rear up — nor could eradicate,
Though all the world was brought to bear, in rigid force —

The Eagle soars, her wonted course —
And watches, faithful every way,
Now high in air — then gently veers to right — or left,
And circuit 'round, — in hasty flight — she speeds,

Then gently lowering, with her feet—
She stands upon her wonted place,
And looks with pride, and condescension,
Down on all the world.
And Kings, and Monarchs, Men of high estate,
And great-renown, go passing by
And needs must bow with reverence to the bird
Who sits aloft:—And ne'er can they approach
But recognize the Power—The honor—And the justice of the tree.
They who its branches spreading far, from every farm protect;
Sit reading books, of deeds, their Fathers wrought,
And wonder as they read of zeal
Which reared, and in a stately form,
Preserved the Trade exhibited by them,
And too-beloved, they long admire the worker.
Their wish,—with ardent wish
The glory to themselves, their fathers had,
And thus would do, the same their fathers did.
But this would not be need'
Now grievous wars, and soon,
For them is coming forth:—
— — — The Eagles wings are drooped!!—
She screams!!!— her wild alarm, and loud!!!—
The multitude, rush out, to meet, and bold resist the hostile foe.
When lo—! in great-arnage, and wonder
Sleep— and long— they find a foe,
A friend as wont', and of their own,
Aye Brothers there raised up— with sword,
And pointed steel,— with wild intent,—
And burning heart, with flame of anger lit,
To slay their brothers there,
And 'stream the ground with human flesh,
Endeavouring hard to rend in twain,

And rending kill the sacred tree
The boon their fathers gave,
And that old eagle too, that long had soared,
In majesty above their heads,
They now would wound, and drag to earth,
And tread beneath their feet, in rage.—
The contest now begins! and darkens all the land.—
The heavens blush! and of kingdoms, empires,
Monarchies, and crowns! none durst to move!
But stand they still with awe!—
For this is war! O ye awful war they see!
Such war was ne'er before.—
Where beauty, peace, and power combined,
Were ripe, and full; complete;
Crowd clamor fills the air, and fire & sword come forth,
And tears, and sighs, and groans, take place of joy & peace,
And thousands, who but days before, in mirth,
Were sporting in the shade—now fall in haste,
And pass away—the earths their bodies saturate,
And thousands take their place.—
The sun may rise as e'er before,
But still she seems enrobed in blood,
The moon and stars who mightily watch—
Companions to the Sentinel or on his lonely beat—
Thee paces to & fro—seem modestly to blush!—
As though they glad would hide their face.—
From mouths of hell, now open on earths,
As one volcanic beast—engulfing all.—
Or had the early dawn, when Sol's transcending rays—
Shall hide them from the scene.— — — — —
— — — — — But still the eagle flutters there—just o'er the highest top—
Arise she screams!—Then dally forth in phalanx strong,
The hosts who still endeared, uphold her there—
Uphold her till they die.—

The Tree is standing yet, — But look around,
The mother side, extending toward the Gulf,
Is not in bloom! nor yet is laden with fruits,
But sparsely clad, with leaves, and these in withering state,
Now speak of ill, to branches or to roots,
And many standing by, are heard to say,
Methinks the Tree will die. —

There were of those, who did not war,
Nor bally fight, with sword in hand,
To smite their fellows down, —
But still within remained
For weightier matters of the law, —
To counsel and improve, to regulate, —
And justice to mete out, to all
They in their wonted sphere, turned quick their minds,
To search, and find if might be found,
The cause whereby the strife, and withering of the Tree came on,
And why their number should divide
And envy each his own, — And that which was renowned,
And favorite of them all, should be torn down,
And dander sent. — They searched the ancient books
And all the books of law, but nothing could be found therein,
To prove the cause. —

At length a man of age, and wiser than the rest,
The chief among them all; assembled,
And sagely counselling them all, bespoke them of the Tree,
If aught about the roots, whence came the ills up,
Might have become annoyed, by maddening worms,
Or vile insect; Of death's swift decay, the sure precursor,
— They thither haste en masse, and dig the earths on every side,
Till on the mother side, on mother roots,
They find defect and visible decay, —
Then with his brawny arms for heavier work —

And more severe, by far, once used, —!
Hee smite the root! — while all look on, some wondering,
Some cawling, some boldly venturing to prevent,
Conjectures, Prophecies, (Diagnosiations, many used,
That all would be destroyed, The blow would wound,
And blast — the hopes their fathers gave, their only hope,
Yet heeding not their cry, nor looking right, or left,
Their sire observed his work, and soon perceives,
What ere he guessed, he struck the blow to gird,

A reptile of most hideous form, and serpentine,
And venomous, and filmy, slimy ought it touched,
With poisonous, deathly slime. — Lay secret in the mother root,
And sent his gums up with the sap,
To every branch, and twig, which emanated thence,
Through leaves and blossoms, casting forth effluvia on the air
That all who might inhale would maddened be, —
And of the fruit whoever ate, would seize him hydrophobic fit
And cause his brain to reel in maddened fury, —

But — only on the side, — The mother side, were these,
Extending toward the gulf.
Yet had he there remained; the poisonous asp,
The tree must wholly die. — Thus maddened, were they all
Who dwell beneath the boughs, that cast the dread ^{the air} miasma on
And fascinated with the charm, to each of them,
The serpent gave. — They sought in unphoed, its power,
— And like to them of old, who made them Gods in sea,
And demonlike; preferring Gods of war, to those of peace & heaven,
— If though concealed as yet, they might perchance
Bring forth, to open view at last, and dragging ^{fast} with this
The faithful eagle, crush her to the death, —
Then place there in her stead,
That foul and hideous serpent,

But faithful to her trust, The Eagle mounts,
Her wings are strengthened now,
A million brazen arms, her sword & spear to her support;
And will not let her sink,
The maddened few, seek her no more
But voluntary let her fly
As e'er before, in majesty she flew,
But seek to sunder far the tree,
Or if perchance a branch, they may but take,
They will have ought on which to set the serpent up,
Yet sundering would be death,
And this he knew who wisely struck the blow,
And therefore did he strike. — — —
The serpent quick recoiled;
Then trembling seized his frame!
He turned upon his back, to die,
And long — and slow — the death. —
Though small, and long concealed,
How great his work, — how near destroyed the tree,
So costly planted there, — and now anon!
His throes of death, cause quaking through the land,
And all the nation shakes in dire alarm! —
He casts his venom on the air, but all in vain!
E'en those who first caressed, now turn against their fell destroyer
And join with hands already raised,
To cause his certain death. —
The grand old tree begins to bud
And beauty gives to beam,
Where withering blighting shades so lately hung,
Most gloomily and darkening all around, —
How sad doth seem the course of fate,
A million voices long have cried
In bitter wailing through the land,

And streams of blood flowed free,
And sighs of broken hearts, and dying pangs,
Heave rent the air so long -
And all the fiendish serpents work, -
The tree was wisely planted there,
And nourished with the greatest skill; -
But none so perfect here below -
That he can do a perfect work -
For had those fathers long ago; when planting,
Scrutinized the germ, from which the tree came forth,
Inspecting every crack, and mark
Of bark or sprig, with greatest care
They might perchance, have seen,
The infant serpent, though so small,
And killed him ere the tree had grown
Or harm was done at all

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Army of Potomac