

1881

A Collection of Memorial Addresses about the Death of James A. Garfield

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PRESIDENT GARFIELD AS THE VICTIM OF AMERICAN POLITICS.

John xi. 50. — IT IS EXPEDIENT FOR US THAT ONE MAN SHOULD DIE FOR THE PEOPLE, AND THAT THE WHOLE NATION PERISH NOT.

As this old Hebrew prophet and priest, with a devout instinct, rose so finely above the immediate agencies of an impending tragedy into the large, providential view, so let us ascend from the personalities of our crisis, from the cross of pain on which our civil head has expired, and the cup we have to drink, and dark coil of mortal instruments, to consummate a signal sacrifice. The pious disciple and preacher, whose religious faith was more to him than his lofty chair, has followed his Lord. Let us acknowledge, in the broil of human passions and the to the superficial eye chance medley of earthly events, a heavenly design. Boldly saith the prophet Amos, "Shall there be evil in the city, and the Lord hath not done it?" "The wrath of man," declares the psalmist David, "shall praise him." Christ bore his agony for a reason of his Father. In our anguish, through confusion and clamor of human acts and voices, let us discover a divine aim, and listen to a word which no policy or plea of ours can drown or divert.

Caiaphas foretold Christ should die for Jews and

Gentiles. How by other death, as well as his, we are redeemed! As by that of the great war President twenty years ago, so may it be by that of our President in peace now. Garfield was like Lincoln in his humble origin, early struggles, extraordinary compass through all grades of the highest office; in his pure, honest, simple, patriotic, and pious character, and in the assassination, too, that tracked the discharge of his duty, as he understood it in his place; victims, both, and atoning sacrifices on their country's altar: for however awful the murderous guilt, the nation needed, and could not, in the supreme counsels, have done without the blood. How that of Lincoln cemented and fortified the land! After it was shed, foreign intervention became at once how impossible! One sign or motion of that arrogance would have stirred the American people to a sacred fury then, after the funeral of their chief, transcending even the white heat of the French Revolution. Lincoln's fall unhorsed Louis Napoleon from his transatlantic plans, and checked in Laird's ship-yard the building of privateers, and sounded the knell of doom on the rebel heart. No more surely did the salvation of the world succeed the crucifixion of Jesus, than did our political deliverance the expiring of our commander and head, shepherd of these then dis-United States: that marvel of country-loving zeal and divine patience; of a poet's imagination and a hero's hand; robbing Moses of his catechism title of "the meekest of men," for he slew no Egyptian or American, only was himself slain. His is the only name, says the clerical Southern author of that interesting book, "Our Brother in Black," universally known among the negroes, the mass of whom have

never heard of Sumner or Garrison. "The Lord made me, but Massa Linkum made me free," said the colored boy; and "Massa Lincoln," said the colored man, "be everywhere like the Lord." He died for our reunion; has not Garfield died for our reform? The civil service of this country and its reform are second in importance to its union alone,—the nation might perish without it; and despite the unhappy quarrel which in the Republican ranks inaugurated the late President's administration and hindered his steps, notwithstanding his own frank and evident mistakes, it was in his own heart to do right. For any wrong move on the political chess-board, to checkmate dangerous insolence with official power, not he but his adviser may have been mainly responsible. It was scarce done by him, but by whoever inspired the act. "The face was the face of Jacob, but the hands were the hands of Esau." Indeed, a great English review, uttering its judgment from that impartial distance across the sea, represents Garfield before his death as a martyr to his resolute resistance of the doctrine of State rights, reappearing in the form of senatorial dictation of nominations put by the Constitution in the President's gift; and I so believe in the sincerity and devotion to duty of the good dead magistrate as not to doubt he would have been inclined to rectify all errors, others' or his own, and as a righteous ruler dispense fairly the enormous patronage which makes the White House stronger than any palace in the world, and, as we have learned so sadly, brings its occupant, like the Russian Czar, within the range of an American Nihilist's deadly ball. But it pleases the Power, whose course to its ends is un baffled by the

wicked whimsies of men that cannot be marplots in its plan, that our unstained and noble representative in the highest chair should serve our at present most exigent cause not mainly by his life but by his death; which let us hope and pray may bring us out of our partisan ways to our patriotic senses, strike a truce of God to our selfish battles and low squabbles for the loaves and fishes, and lift us to a higher plane of equal justice to all sections and parties than we have had under the *personal* government we reproach other nations with, and which the American, not by its fundamental law, but in its perverted partisan practice, has so largely become.

No better omen could be of our regeneration than the universal appreciation, even in that beautiful extravagance so true to the human heart, of the man in whom we were politically incarnate, the hold-fast of our common love to the sufferer whose agony of eighty days is over, and whose behavior in the sick-room was so beautiful and sublime, while his pattern of personal sanctity and fidelity in his domestic and social relations should be sanctified to this people in all its borders as is that of Queen Victoria to our mother England's homes. Had he not been good even more than he was great, the soul of mankind in all regions, which is never quite misled, would not, through its delegates in state and church, have throbbled as it did with a three-months' sympathy in our trial, and with this last sudden participation in the earthquake shock of our grief. No inheritance of privilege, as in most sovereignties abroad, descends to the family of the deceased, whose own prerogative no king's or emperor's could exceed; for he was the

choice of free citizens, and chosen to be no figure-head of the ship, but in a trust to summon his cabinet and appoint many thousand servants of the commonwealth, which has proved to be perilous as immense. A man who was fallible like us all, but who never had an ill intent, on whose honor is no stain, in whose private life no speck, in the sun of his integrity no spots, he will be buried to-morrow in a genuine dignity, unaffected sorrow, and perfect peace, bequeathing to his successor and to the present and coming generation what he meant when, in his last anguish, he cried, "The people, the people, *my* trust." If not unerring, yet upright; brave in fight; faithful to our menaced finance; reaching the top of honor unsought; winning the wide esteem which makes any particular detraction unavailing and substantially false. Were there just criticisms, they would be withheld, or but hinted as shadows in the picture of the politician he had been, blending more grandly in the statesman he became or was to be. Did that eye, so great and fine, of the Most High perceive even he would be unequal to the herculean task to cleanse away the accumulating foulness of our coarsely managed affairs, that by adverse circumstance and fierce enmity he might be thwarted or overcome, and that, speaking like Abel with his blood, and acting with spiritual potency out of his grave, he could accomplish more than with all the energy of his hand on the helm? Then, "after life's fitful fever he sleeps well." If "the evil that men do lives after them," the "good is *not* interred with their bones," but often wanes into proportions beyond its actual passing scope. Sure it is ordained for this man to be canonized, buried in odor of sanctity, shine as a star in our

political calendar, become like Lincoln, though no doubt of lesser magnitude, a splendid myth in this United States story, and work as a memory far more than the effects of his so clearly recorded deeds. Thus by the law of character, which transcends performance and even genius, it is plainly decreed. All the low details will be gathered up to adorn him in his pre-eminent post; he will be enshrined and half idolized in that homage to men of holy and solid worth which is akin and a step to the worship of God.

“The king is dead, long live the king”; the President is dead, to the President welcome and all hail, with vast and fearful stint before him to be the peer of that predecessor whose traits will be historic in many tongues, and are celebrated already not alone in English, but German and French. From the Vice-Presidency to the Presidency is a long, and how unexpected, unprepared-for — although, we should never in our elections forget, possible — stride! Mr. Arthur has no option: the duty devolves on him, as much as of a son to take his father’s place, or a partner in business to settle the accounts of the firm. Let us be as generous to him succeeding to his late superior, who ranked him in position, and soars in our estimate as he departs. Let him not be prejudged. A behavior during the illness and at the demise of the President as fit as could be conceived has endeared him already to his million-fold constituency, and is his best inauguration; and it is not in human nature for him to be deaf to the divine voice in that appointment which exceeds and excludes all those of lower monarchs or magistrates, or to disregard the emphasis which Providence lays on a conscientious career over

all earthly fame, promotion, or success. He must be possessed in his elevation with a religious mind, as he receives the admonition that “the paths of glory lead but to the grave.” Remains of the President, and how they are guarded and lie in state, and are transported to the resting-place near his nativity chosen by himself? What remains of him and will remain, but his virtues, so real, open, and plain? In his position, what an ascent from meanness and poverty; what a descent to pain, prostration, and the tomb, and the disappearance of his kith and kin from the Capitol hill and house! What a revolution of the wheel of fortune, or rather the allotments of the immutable will by which all things are moved; signifying to the new incumbent, in this event so startling to a nation and the human race, not only how sober and responsible the obligation he assumes, but with what advantages of the divinely hushed disputes of sections and parties it comes for him to hand! Was ever in our annals opportunity more largely or favorably marked? What shall we say, — what does the situation suggest to Mr. Arthur, but to be as noble and knightly as his English namesake of the Round Table in the chivalrous traditions of the mother-land? Could so poor a word from so obscure a quarter reach him, I would say, but that he must say it to himself: “You cannot espouse a quarrel in your own or any party over that dead body, which would turn or tremble in its grave were a bone of contention perpetuated in the place where it so lately sat. You cannot take sides, — either side, — in a wrangle about claims to posts and to patronage. It is not, from this decree of God through his doo-ster of death, your legacy, nor you its residuary legatee.

Your forerunner could desire from himself no such bequest; and for you, expressly or by implication, to grasp or adopt any such inheritance amid the shadows of the church-yard and out of the sobs of a land in mourning, were an impious, indecent, shameful thing." But the imagination of any preference of party to country now is itself an offence; and if the laying low of our honored head can be sanctified to a revival of the old patriotism and a reform of partisan practice, to a change of heart in our politics, to transform selfish into equitable distribution of official favor, Mr. Garfield will not have died in vain; he will have died for benefit greater than he could compass even in his life. "Mr. Arthur, you can do as well as he. Nay, with the occasion in this tender and awful crisis presented, you can do better than he; for even he, fallible and overpressed, was far from perfect in what he did."

But another figure on our canvas, that of the assassin, though we would fain hide it, cannot be kept out of view; for it is not the accident or unimportant accessory it is by the press or by private opinion sometimes represented to be. "This effect" of a slaughtered chief magistrate "defective comes," in Shakespeare's phrase, "by cause," reaching farther than the vile person to whom it is referred. In the great tale of human salvation, Judas the betrayer could not be left out. The war of emancipation must have the shape of Wilkes Booth, dogging the steps and piercing the temples of Lincoln, our great civil martyr and saint; and the civil-service reform had no other way of completion, nay, of earnest initiation, but by the pistol of Guiteau. Call it superstition, take affront

as for an insult at the idea, these interventions of dreadful crime have their shocking part to play on the stage of action and progress for mankind; and out of evil comes how much of our good? In India hundreds of human lives are lost every year by the bites of poisonous serpents; and the President was stung as by a snake in human form. What shall be done with the viper, then? Nothing, I answer, let us hope, *just now*, but to hold him safe. We are at a funeral, the obsequies of a great officer, whose figure should occupy our horizon and fill the scene. Think little or nothing of the assassin, but for the moment keep him out of sight and for some considerable time out of court. "Stand back and let the coffin pass!" There should be what the artist calls distance and perspective in the landscape and portraiture in which we are for the hour, as a community, embraced and engaged. The *cortege* of mourners fills the land; fifty millions of folk make it up, even the wretch, its author or preliminary, being one, although he might be torn in pieces were he anywhere in our wide borders seen on the route. But it were a disgrace to the whole population to have him dealt with by a mob; and General Sherman is right to say he must be protected for the law to dispose of, even if it bring hundreds into the same deadly risk. His life has not a millionth part the sacredness of that which he took: yet the soldier Mason, trying to shoot him with the gun, not his own, he was but in trust with as a guard, committed an act of the same lawless color as Guiteau's, with which a court-martial should deal: and the entire American people would lose caste to kill the one man, rearing a gallows on the President's

coffin, and keep unpunished the other. Let cool, deliberate Justice hold her scale of even beam for both, not only as a wood and iron ornament on the cupola of the court-house, but in our living hands, so that procedure, after mature reflection, may be judicious and wise.

One good result will be recoil of the American mind from the doctrine of assassination. As a great ship rises from and against the billows she is buffeted by, so the good sense or sentiment of the popular heart, more surely than even our strong-headed calculations, scorns, resists, passes triumphant over the oratory of dastardly murder in secret, the rhetoric of dynamite and dagger; just as it despises Joab, thrust under the fifth rib with the "Art thou in health, my brother?" and Judas Iscariot's kiss in the garden and "Hail Master," to introduce the midnight band from the chief priests and Pharisees, with lanterns and torches and weapons.

The *Franco-American Messenger*, a French paper in New York, praising Mr. Garfield's qualities, thinks assassination not so strange in despotic countries, but marvels that a popularly chosen and self-made man, as once and again among us, can be exposed to such a fate as the telegraph sent to every post-office station, and to the tolling bells of all the cities and towns, last Monday night. But no institutions of freedom, no democracy or republican art, more than autocratic or aristocratic sway, has invented an antidote to human passions in their revengeful rage; and one lesson for us of what has so sadly occurred is to moderate our boasting over our *liberty*, by so many falsely conceived as license, when, in its derivation, the word means

"learning," — *liber*, a book, practice of knowledge, obeying law. The lesson is to abate our contempt of other regions that cannot any longer out-Herod our catastrophes, and not to fancy how good and excellent among the nations we are; but that we have for improvement, especially in civil reform, as much room as in our statutes or our territory. Is not this the meaning of that shot again "heard round the world," in a different way from the muskets at Lexington? What to do with the man that fired it to reverberate with such dismal sound? Let us quietly wait for the law to decide, not applying to him the doctrine of assassination he has at least done us the favor — so much good even out of his sin — to bring into disrepute, as it can be directed to a President as well as a Czar, and acted on not only in Russia, but the United States. Its preachers will be apt for a while to hold their peace on a theory proving in practice so bad to humiliate as well as wound, and to strike a republic as surely as a throne, conspirators not being likely to distinguish among rulers when rulers as such are hunted as game. As for Mr. Guiteau, many must have said before Sherman wrote, "Hanging is too good." Horsecwhipping some have proposed, but does not that imbrute the more? Removal somehow from the society, citizenship, and body politic, at the whole of which he has struck, should be for the present his doom. Let such as would hound him for his fault not image him the monster as a typical man: remember he is not constituted like ordinary men; not a human angel but human animal, there being among our species wild beasts, venomous insects, tigers with teeth, and cobras with fangs. But when any such quadruped or winged

thing takes the upright shape, does it not deserve compassion more than our revenge? Yet, with the spontaneous litany of a nation unavailing against the wiser Will to save our chief, who thought of praying for Guiteau? A service or collect should be instituted for him too in the moral pillory of our annals, where he must forever stand. Would we could recover from the "lost arts" that mark put upon Cain, so that no man finding should kill him, but his degradation be stamped with a deeper than the line of any strangling cord! He was not insane, we cry. Was he of sound mind, in a conduct so preposterous and wild? I think a mania had come into him from the *fixed idea* on which he had brooded so long. But should his craze spread, we could scarce discriminate it in our tribunals from the worst guilt; the protection of the community being the foundation of all written and statutory law. Yet the soul, in its lowest life, should never be given up; and even this man's welfare, salvation, should be sought in whatever penalty is meted out.

As respects our anxious suspense on the medical treatment of the case, it is a mercy to be assured that the ball was fatal from the first; that no attempt at its extraction would have been safe; and that we may hope to be spared a strife of doctors over the relics to be laid away to-morrow for final rest. How much more than he told, he that is happily rid of his mutilated frame must have endured! But that endurance, that struggle for life, that submission, in which, like his Master, he uttered no complaint even against the foe that smote him, was his crown of glory, will be the peak of his fame, and has already had the compen-

sation of a fellow-feeling for his and our distress from the ends of the earth; an interest and attention which the most successful administration of our affairs would never have drawn to his name had he lived.

"One touch of nature makes the whole world kin";

and what benefit as well as delight when the cup of communion not only stands in solid silver on the board, or is drunk in the conclave of some little sect, but passes round among the nations through all latitudes and longitudes of the globe, and is taken, not only wherever a fort stands or ship rocks under the stars and stripes, but is shared by French president and English queen, European emperors, sultan, cardinal, pope; while Catholics join in friendly procession with Protestants at home after that honored bier; and in the united love of every kindred and tribe and tongue, like the red aurora that sometimes visits us in our northern sky, the millennium seems to be dawning over the sepulchre of a man! How fit the language of Caiaphas, predicting that Jesus should "die, not only for his own nation, but also gather together into one all those scattered abroad as children of God!" There is a purpose no iniquity can balk in whatever transpires. The dead, more than the live magistrate will bless. The course of things will not be broken, but upraised. Let this be blood of atonement to compose quarrel, usher in an era of good feeling, and quench forever into cold ashes and lifeless embers the coals of burning political hate! Are we aware how deep our civil sickness is, how far — yes, with us, our very selves and our friends — party has taken the place of public spirit, how, like contending hosts in battle,

we are arrayed on opposing sides, how partisan, instead of patriotic, almost the best of us have become, and how sorely we need such heroic treatment for our cure, as, at the hands of the great Physician, we in fact receive? Let us have grace to implore the sanctification of the bitter remedy he sees it necessary to choose for our case from his store!

As I heard the chirp of bird and insect in the wood, and as, in the gloaming, the shadows of night softly once more fell on the general grief, I thought how heedless of our calamity Nature appears to be. It looks almost like a mock to our tears and convulsions to have her go on so tranquil and serene, not caring whether a monarch falls to the ground or a babe. Yet, instantly, on a second thought, how kind in her to have no perturbation, however we her children may be disturbed! Did she enter into our humor, and quake or weep with us, instead of soothing, healing our spirit and drying our cheeks, how much worse, beyond control our trouble would become! She is our mother the more, and competent to nurse, because she does not aggravate the emotion she yet sympathizes with, nor encourage in us any excess even of affliction or supplication. Things will go on without check or interruption from the vanishing of any man. The sun will rise and set, and the stars with their mysterious hope, vast room, and infinite possibility, come out. Government will proceed without jar or pause. Business will keep up its unceasing sound in all the fields and factories, markets and marts. Death is but a messenger; all the angels are of life; and some strong one has borne our leader to a better place than that at best harassing and thorny post, with all its lustrous eminence, he has

left. Let his successor have all the confidence which his deportment and his speech, alike admirable in the emergency, claim. How often in a home, the survivors are exalted by some spirit unseen that has put off its clothing and left its handful of clay! The White House, turned into a sick-room and death chamber, cannot be entered with a rude, irreverent step. There is admonition, warning, solemn counsel in the apartments so still. There are ghosts there to teach without voice. There is a whisper louder than any cannonade to arouse the occupant and pervade the land. The flag floats over the Capitol, not gay and flaunting now, but with a new color in its folds, as if it had been stained, yet with cleansing and glorifying drops. May it signify more than even honor, loyalty, justice, impartiality, love, and peace.

God speed the President that is! To be a benefactor, never had President of the United States more magnificent chance. Never were the people, North and South, readier than now, in their elevated and softened mood, to rally to their supreme officer's support, and greet in his policy every measure to carry a real boon. We prayed for his forerunner, how importantly! Let us send up a petition of wisdom from on high for him to guard and to guide, and one also to him, that he will seek and trust in our fathers' God, and be under Him a good Providence at his station for their sons' and daughters' weal.

Then even what has been mad and absurd in all that has come and gone, will be constrained to furtherance of the right; and our seal fulfil its motto, that "He may be with us as with our sires." Yesterday morning yonder, after the thunder-storm, I plucked

from the swamp roses which had softly bloomed during the night. In the night of our trouble, out of the tempest of our misfortune, will come beauty and bloom.

The feeling, with steady concentration, for intensity and extent without example since Lincoln's death, made deeper by the peculiar circumstances of Mr. Garfield's long illness than even that rare sensation near two decades since, is not only a tribute to the President's private character, but a testimony of our loyalty to the government assailed in his person, resentment of the violence against law and order, and resolution to hold treasonable and intolerable any threat to that majestic authority which is for the common safety and defence; although signals of respect, so many and marked, imply an extraordinary body of worth in the deceased man. Let his memorial be the renewal of our vows to the Constitution that shall survive us all; and let our sorrow stir our religious faith. "There is a Providence that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." If it took in, for the working out of its own designs, the Pharisaic fury in our Lord's crucifixion, it has no less its sure resultant despite, nay, in sacred use of, our two Presidential assassinations. We cannot spoil its calculations. Through all our trials and cross purposes it will run its straight line of mercy and truth. On what a larger than any mathematical blackboard, each and all together, we do the sum of life! The issue will be holiness, deliverance, peace, and bliss. So let us trust and pray; and consider well in our national house-keeping, in time to come, the *Divine Economy*.