

### COLONEL STEPTOE'S BATTLE.\*

The American people are still in the making. It has been said that ours is a country without history, without traditions and without national pride. If we lack in history, it is to our credit that its few and scattered pages record no instance of oppression or wrong to the citizen. The light of progress illumines its pages, and it is better that it be so than to record a glory equal to that of the ancient kingdoms.

If we lack in traditions, what comfort can we claim in that those we do cherish stand for truth, honor and patriotism. What country, nation or state can boast a legacy so rich as the story of Lexington or Valley Forge? What character in the chronicles of humanity can furnish the inspiration to love, to do justice, perseverance, mercy, patience, courage and fortitude, as the simplest tale of the simplest character the world has ever known—our own Lincoln. Let the world claim what it will. Around an humble life America has built a very fountain of influence that answers for the efforts of all the ages. Let boast who will of chivalry and deeds of valor; we claim them all and more. Our first and great tradition is based on the principle of love for humanity.

It may be that we lack in national pride. If to establish and maintain schools, hospitals, libraries, to build up great business enterprises, to maintain an army that has never been defeated, and never will be defeated, and a navy that is the pride of the seas, to found a nation and in the comparative nothingness of an hundred and thirty years make it the greatest of all the earth is a matter of national pride, then we can with truth and comfort say in pride, that pride which is not boasting, bigoted or intolerant, that we are the proudest people in the world.

Every American can well be proud of his country, of the great men who have been called to rule and govern it. He can well be proud of his State and its accomplishments. Wherever we go or return the work of our people cry aloud our purposes and our achievements. The cottage and the mansion alike sing a paen to our country's greatness.

In line with the development of our history, our traditions and our national pride, we are marking in fit and proper manner the historic spots of our country, that all "who pass this way

\*Address delivered at the dedication of the Steptoe Memorial Park.

may know the truth," and knowing, take resolution for the future.

In Europe there exists a beautiful custom, that of erecting shrines along the highways and in the villages. These are dedicated to some saint, and in mute command impel the faithful to bow the head in fervent prayer.

The influence of this custom cannot be measured. Anything, be it a shrine, a tablet or a monument erected to the heroic dead, that calls man to stop, to think for himself, within himself, is not a pagan custom, a vagary or naked in its significance. It meets the fundamental demand of the human soul for rest and refreshment, a time for thought, with the world shut out. It has existed since the first altar was erected, and will exist so long as the soul impulse is dominant in man.

We have been slow and negligent perhaps. The world loves show, and the more conspicuous are cared for first. But the people are just, and in time our whole duty will be done. The nation and the state have had no time to pick out the places and erect the shrines that are so justly due the martyr and the pioneer, whose first grasp of this, our country, was violently broken, and whose blood ran out in tiny rivulets to mark the cherished places of the civilization so soon to follow.

We have been slow, but to the great honor of our people, and as evidence of its democracy, the reclamation of this spot and its future marking will depend upon those who are near and dear to us, our neighbors and our friends. We are under deep obligation to the people of Rosalia. To Esther Reed Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution of Spokane, and to Mrs. Ivan Chase, of Colfax, our thanks are especially due. In the veins of these noble women flow the blood of Bunker Hill, of Saratoga and of Yorktown. The soul of the patriot still lives, and to these mothers of men of a nation will in turn bear grateful acknowledgement for a work which you and I, my brother, had so long neglected.

The story of the Steptoe expedition is a simple one and might be soon told. I may assume that in the main it is familiar to all of us. The people of Rosalia have made it familiar. The newspapers have only recently reviewed it, and it is not my purpose to say more than I deem sufficient as a proper premise to the conclusion I would draw. It is enough to say that word had come from the settlers in the Colville country that the Indians had become insolent. It had been reported that one or more Americans had been murdered on the Palouse River. It was known that

Kamiakin, Chief of the Yakimas, was hostile to the whites. Therefore, on the 6th day of May, 1858, Colonel Steptoe, at the head of a company of about 110 men, set out for the Spokane and Colville country. On the 16th they learned of the presence of the Indians in force a few miles beyond, and on the evening of that day found themselves in the presence of from 600 to 1,000 fighting men, representing the Spokane, Coeur d'Alene and Palouse tribes. The troops camped that night in the presence of the Indians.

“Finding that he should have to contend against great odds, without being prepared, Steptoe determined upon retreating, and early in the morning of the 17th began his return to the Palouse.”

This in itself was an invitation to the Indians to attack. They had proceeded only three or four miles when overtaken by the Indians. With jeers and taunts of cowardice they circled about the little band. They were better armed than the dragoons, and the unruly ones did not hesitate to fire, believing the white man to be afraid. Slowly, laboriously the retreat went on, over yonder hill, through yonder draw. The savage made merry over his certain victim. The love of torture, delight in the suffering of others, characteristic of his race, is the only hypothesis upon which to rest the comparatively happy termination of this disastrous venture; otherwise, had the rules of civilized warfare prevailed, they would have shot them down at once, or surrounded them, have captured all, who to escape a fate so miserable had not ended their own careers. Finally, the day drawing on, a dragoon was stricken and he fell. Immediately the order not to fire was forgotten. The battle was on. The soldier who has often been a coward, in the mind of his enemy, because his training demanded that he meet death rather than disobey orders, threw off restraint and became a brother thirsting for revenge. Even at this time, in consequence of the pious effort of the good Priest Joset, there were but few Indians engaged, and the troops might have retired without great loss, but for the fact that Jaques and Zachary, the latter a brother-in-law of Head Chief Vincent, were killed. The Coeur d'Alenes, whose hands had hitherto never been dipped in the white man's blood, broke loose from the influence of the priest, and their fury knew no bounds. Pressed to the last degree, overcome by heat, thirst and anxiety, the hill just above us was gained. They had to stay upon the hill-tops—it was the vantage ground. The flat was before them. To cross it probably meant utter annihilation, for the Indians would at once take the vantage ground hitherto held by the soldiers. It was resolved to make a stand and fight

as long as possible. The supplies were gathered, the horses picketed, and the men lying flat upon the ground made a cordon about them. Thus they fought, returning shot for shot, until the evening came. Being without ammunition and almost exhausted, it was resolved to flee.

In the battle there had fallen twelve brave souls, among them Captain Oliver H. P. Taylor and Lieutenant William Gaston. Young, brave and daring officers, who had won by courageous conduct the love of their fellows. Their bodies were recovered, buried, and horses were led over the shallow graves to obliterate the mound left by the intrusion of the returning clay. "Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note." The Howitzers were dismantled and buried, and quietly, silently in the darkness of the night, they stole away.

In passing it may be said that with the coming of the night the immediate danger had passed. The previous night had been passed in security. The Indian has never fought at night. Whatever the danger of the day, the night usually brought security. The war whoop has come with the first flush of dawn, and died with the setting sun. It must be remembered, however, that Colonel Steptoe was absolutely ignorant of the Indian character, otherwise he may have given ear to the warning of the friendly Nez Percés before he crossed the river on his way, and certainly he would have halted, when on the 16th he was informed that the Indians were but a few miles beyond and prepared to resist his further progress. The time and manner of his withdrawal were also inexcusable on grounds other than ignorance. One bold man has often awed or won the admiration of the hostile Indian. Any act, however, indicating fear has been enough to bring disaster and defeat to many a brave soul who failed to appreciate the impression left by his conduct upon the mind of the untutored adversary.

Much has been written in criticism and in defense of this brave officer. Whether in starting with a handful of men, mostly inexperienced, with only side arms, other than the two Howitzers, which could have been of but little value in any event, and but little ammunition, to make an incursion into a country where he should have expected, or at least been prepared for hostile demonstration, is an issue which I shall not undertake to decide. Let the historian speak and the people judge.

Be it remembered, however, that he had not been trained to meet the Western Indian. He was a soldier trained to warfare in the rules of war. The pioneer and settler recovered the West-

ern reserve; they met craft with craft, cunning with cunning; they made punishment swift, sure, and sometimes terrible. This could not be learned, aye it could not be tolerated, at West Point, where men were trained to fight their peers. As a rule, the regular army was not until more recent years successful in its dealing with the Indian. Indian fighting, now happily passed, was a development, and when Colonel Steptoe was in command Crooks and Miles were unbearded striplings and had not yet taught the government that rules did not apply, and that the company, battalion or brigade must be broken into individual units to meet a savage foe. In my humble judgment Colonel Steptoe has been misjudged. He may have been in error, but he was not at fault. Error springs from ill judgment; fault from disregard of that we ought to know. Men's errors are buried with them. Steptoe lived to meet his critics, and received the merciless pelting of the "warrior of the upholstered chair."

Custer and Canby, the one jealous of his glory, the other in the service of the Master, were guilty of grievous fault—they should have known. They are accepted as heroes, for they died upon the field of battle. Expressing, then, my own opinion, without design or purpose to influence the ultimate verdict, I say, in justice to humanity, that Colonel Steptoe was a hero no less to be revered than many before whom death in its mercy has drawn the curtain of silence. If he was rash and indiscreet in leading his followers into danger, he was merciful and heroic in his retreat.

Let one speak who is best qualified to know:

"What breaks my heart, is to see Colonel Steptoe, the zealous protector of Indians, exposed to the blame which ordinarily attaches itself to bad success; however, in the eyes of reflecting men, who know his situation, his retreat will do him infinite honor. It is not, I think, the first officer who could thus have drawn himself out from so bad a situation, surrounded by an army of ferocious beasts, hungry after their prey; of Indians sufficiently numerous to relieve each other, and who had always the means to procure fresh horses. It appeared impossible that the troops could escape. Besides, the plan of the Indians was not to give them any rest until they had crossed the Nez Perce; the Spokanes were to be there early on the morning of the 18th to relieve the Coeur d'Alenes. In a position so critical, the colonel deceived the vigilance of his enemies, and throwing them his provisions as an inducement to delay, he defeated their plan. He foresaw without doubt, that the Indians on the one hand had let him take the advance, and on the other tempted by the booty abandoned the pursuit; so that if the troops have escaped, they owe it to the sagacity of the colonel."—Joset.



Nor are we here to condemn the Indian and charge him with the murder of those whose memory we would hallow. We should always attune our judgment to meet the conditions presented in the particular case. It is not for us to judge harshly those whose acts are consistent with the nature that the Almighty Father has planted in their hearts and souls. We must approach the case from the viewpoint of the offender, find his motive, and let "mercy temper justice." You say he was treacherous; it may be true. You say he fired while we were retreating, it is true; but withal he acted in accord with his nature. We met the Indian in battle, and he fought us as we would fight, with all the zeal and means at his command. He fought with the light and understanding which he had. He may have misunderstood our plans and the peaceful nature of our mission, but it should be remembered that this was the cherished and traditional hunting ground of his fathers. He had word that his distant relatives had been crowded out, and limitations put upon his going and his coming in the beautiful valley of the Willamette. The lawful acts of his fathers had been proscribed and he had been punished by the whites.

At the conference with General Stevens the Indians had been told that they must retire to reservations, a part of them to be among the Nez Percés, with whom the more northern tribes were not friendly. They had been told by mischievous marplots, that the whites would take their lands and they would receive no pay for them. They believed themselves to be the owners of their country and had sent word that soldiers must not be sent among them. They had said that a road must not be surveyed through their country to the headwaters of the Missouri, and they knew that an expedition was preparing for that purpose.

More than that, the chiefs of the Spokanes and Coeur d'Alenes were men of strength and character; they loved their people and their homes. Truth insists that we speak the truth. With the coming of the civilized white they could foresee the passing of their race. They had seen disease and pestilence scattered in the wake of immigration, and liquor had been introduced by the trader. The judgment and manhood of the tribes had thus been weakened and their morals corrupted. Let us imagine ourselves in a similar situation before we render the verdict that will condemn these tribes to the contumely indulged by the unthinking and careless who measure all human conduct by their own pharisaical standard of right.

The Coeur d'Alenes and Spokanes had legitimate reason to

believe that their demands would be heeded, for they had always been friendly with the whites. They had protested their neutrality in the troubles with the Yakimas. No crimes of any consequence had been charged to them, and had the progress of the troops been originally arranged through the intervention of the missionary, I doubt not it would have been peacefully accomplished.

Father Joset's influence over the Indians was limited, in that he did not know all of them, and they resented his interference or suggestion in matters other than spiritual. To use his own words, "You appear to think that we could do almost anything with the Indians. Far from it. Even among the Coeur d'Alenes there is a certain number that we never see, that I do not know in any manner. The majority mistrust me when I come to speak in favor of Americans."

But in the instance we record the Father would have undoubtedly allayed the ill-feeling of the Indians but for the unfortunate fact that Steptoe was far away from the direct trail from Fort Walla Walla to Colville. That trail did not lead through the country they cherished as their home and hunting ground. The Indian was torn in thought and distracted in purpose.

Standing between the forms of two religions, the one adopted by the Nez Perces, and the other by himself, it is not surprising that tribal jealousies should be fomented. The presence of the Nez Perces among the soldiers was calculated to increase suspicion in the savage mind. Like his white brother, he believed his form of religion the proper one, and resented the intrusion of those whom he believed would interfere with his beliefs.

Unfair indeed are those who insist that Father Joset was culpable or blamable for the attack. Could it be expected that he could impress the Indian with the idea that to fight was wrong, that he could overcome their traditions, the martial spirit, the growth of the centuries? In truth you must answer no. No man living or who has ever lived could have done so, especially when the Indian knew that a christian, civilized people insisted on the right to bear arms, to organize, and to fight in force.

Religion is a growth, and he had not grown in it. In the hour of test and trial no form of religion has proved binding upon the mind and conscience of a savage people, unless that people have themselves developed it by gradual and imperceptible stages, or passed more than one generation beyond the time of its adoption.

In the presence of exciting influences, it is not surprising that

he should have forgotten the lessons of mercy. If he had been taught mercy and peace he had also heard much that the savage nature could not comprehend.

The story of the Genesis had been told by the preacher and the priest. The story of Joshua, and of Jehovah upholding the shields and spears of Israel were his also. In the light of retrospect and history a dangerous leaven to set working in the savage mind. In it he saw God's direct intervention. He saw him feed the hungry, clothe the naked and heal the sick. He believed the white man's religion rather than his own effort would bring him peace and comfort and habitations, and may we say it, shot and powder and guns. His simple trust must surely be shattered. He was hungry, yet he was not fed. His child was sick, yet it died. It is marvelous that the missionary exercised as much influence as he did. All these things moved him to reject the advice and counsel of the priest. And in judging him we must judge him as he was, a simple savage, prompted by the instinct that prompts even the brute to defend its own and its home, and blinded by an utter but natural misconception of the object of Colonel Steptoe's expedition.

Have I been too generous in my treatment of our foe on that day? Say it if you will, that our heroes were murdered by these painted savages, condemn the Indian character if you will, but remember that on the shaft to be erected and which will mark the place where your heroes received their mortal wounds, there will appear a tablet as enduring as the one upon which the names of Taylor and Gaston will appear, one that will bear another name, and that name will be that of Timothy; one who never knew the taint of other blood, but who from longer association better understood, and whose people better understood, the white man.

If the savage, hanging on with murderous persistence, held our little army for his torture, it must in justice be said, that it was a savage who led these brave men out of their extremity and to the first place of safety open to them, and that among his own people, likewise savages, who were sufficient in numbers to annihilate them. But they fed them, comforted them, and being rested, sent them on their way in security. I have said that Colonel Steptoe was out of the direct road to Colville, and that this fact impressed the Indians with his hostile intent. It also impressed Father Joset with the notion of Timothy's treachery. He says:

"I knew, from Colonel Steptoe, that his guide told him he was conducting him to Colville by the nearest road. Now that



the guide mistook himself so grossly, is absurd to suppose. It appears necessary to conclude that in conducting the troops straight upon the camp of the Indians, he had design. It cannot be supposed that he ignored the irritation that the presence of the troops would produce upon the Indians; and as for the rest, the intriguing of this guide is well known. I see no other way to explain his conduct, than to say that he laid a snare for the Coeur d'Alenes, whom he wished to humiliate, and that seeing afterwards the troops fall in the ditch that he had dug for others, he has done everything possible to draw them from it."

In the light of history this, in my judgment, is unmerited and unjust, and proceeded from a misunderstanding, or rather from a want of knowledge of all the facts. It will be remembered that Colonel Steptoe's first object was to punish the Palouse Indians who had murdered the American travelers. This necessitated his going through the Palouse Country. He crossed the Snake at Alpowa and was, as we know, and as Timothy (who was at Alpowa when Steptoe arrived) said, on the direct road to Colville. Fort Walla Walla was on the present site of Wallula. It will thus be seen that Father Joset as well as the Indians, ignorant of the fact as they were, had some reason to suspect the good intent of the faithful Timothy.

What a wonderful thing is Time. How it smooths out the rough places. How it overcomes passion and eradicates prejudice. Fifty years; what accomplishment! The world has been made anew in fifty years, and from the watch towers of our present development we can see in the midst of the long ago the drama of that day re-enacted. We see three great and grand men, each struggling in his own way to serve his fellow man. Those men were Steptoe, Joset and Timothy.

The cupidity of man had put into the hands of these children of the plains better arms than the soldiers had. The priest and missionary had come armed with trusting faith, preaching peace and mercy. The fur traders had come armed, and with arms to put into the hands of every one, whether civilized or uncivilized, the means to swell the winter's pack of fur, that royalty might be adorned and wealth disport itself in the drawing rooms, oblivious of the dangers and injustice to humanity sown in the wake of those who gather the playthings of civilization. The missionary and the trader were unconsciously more hostile in their purposes than were the Indian and the white man. In all its advancement the light of the world has suffered temporary obscurity from the greed of man. Short sighted, indeed, was the policy of a government that permitted the armament of a race that had contested every inch of the course of empire from the

Atlantic to the Pacific. Were it not so this narrative and countless others of like character would find no occasion for utterance.

Among the relics recovered from the battlefield, and with which I have been made familiar, are three old army pistols, the tires from a gun carriage, and a six pound shot. These were gathered from the finders by the late George D. Anderson, who took a great interest in the subject with which we are dealing. No doubt these will in time find their way into a state or national museum, and for all time speak to the passer-by of a time gone forever, and conditions in our national development impossible of repetition.

Upon this ground a marble shaft will be raised to commemorate the event and make record of lives run out in the performance of duty,—one that will endure through countless ages, but it will not be the first monument erected to mark the spot. When Colonel Wright came north in the fall of 1858 to punish the Indians and after he had routed them at the battle of the Three Lakes, he sent an expedition under Major Greer, Lieutenant Gregg, Pender and White, to the battlefield. Doctor Randolph accompanied them. Gregg and Randolph were in the Steptoe fight. The occurrence is thus described by Lieutenant Kipp:

“At noon the dragoons returned from their expedition to the battlefield. They reached there at 12 o'clock the day before, and found the hills which on that sad day were swarming with their excited foes, now as silent and deserted as a city of the dead. The whole battlefield presented a scene of desolation. In the heat of battle but few of the bodies of the fallen could be recovered, and in the night, before their retreat, these were the only ones which could receive a hasty burial. The rest had to be left on the field where they met their fate. The wolves and the birds of prey had held their festival, and for nearly six months the sun and rain had bleached the whitened bones which were scattered around.

“As Lieutenant Gregg and Doctor Randolph rode over the field, they could point out to the other officers the scene of each event in that day's hard fight,—where the battle began, where charge after charge was made to drive back the foes who so far outnumbered them, where Taylor and Gaston fell in the desperate attack at the head of their men, and where they were gathered in the night for the brief consultation, worn out with the contest, yet seventy-five miles of country to be passed over before they could place the river between them and their exulting enemies.

“The remains of the two officers were found, and the scattered bones of the men, gathered up, to be brought back. The two howitzers were found, also, where they had been buried. The Indians had not disturbed them, but contented themselves with carrying off the gun carriages, which they afterwards burned.

“One thing more remained to be done. Among the articles

left on the ground was a pair of shafts belonging to one of the guns. These were taken and fashioned into a rude cross, which was set up in the midst of the battlefield, to remind all future travelers of the sad event of which this had been the scene. And then, after despositing around it all that could be gathered up from the relics scattered over the hillside and wherever the fight was waged, they left the field in solemn silence."

It will thus be seen that the impulse of the race to mark the resting place of the dead was manifest. Long after the settlement of this country the pioneer here gathered relics from the mound of rubbish. The rude cross was carried away, possibly by some one who did not know its purpose, otherwise he would have reverently protected it. Now all identity is lost, and even the spot we dedicate must be pointed out by those who survived that awful day.

Fifty years ago today the spot we dedicate became historic ground. In the evolution of our Western border no concern was taken of those places where the tender shoots of civilization were first nourished by the blood of our countrymen. Upon this soil we shall hereafter rear a lasting monument that will speak of the occurrences of that not remote, yet distant past, when our voices are stilled and we shall be forgotten.

This soil, like all the boundless prairies, the fertile valleys, and the majestic mountains of the West, found its way into the great cauldron, under which the fires of human energy have since burned without ceasing. It passed from a careless and heedless government into private ownership. It has for many years made its return to the husbandmen who have tilled it. It has played its humble part, its significance unheeded, and its glory unsung. Like the pure gold of self-sacrifice, it has been lost in the simple effort of the every day.

But on this day which too shall be marked as worthy of keeping, it shall be rescued from sordid uses and made to stand out as a great landmark, significant, inspiring.

The names of our historic dead, their accomplishments and their memory belong to all of us. The citizen, of whatever degree, can claim them as his own. They are a national heritage, and whether marked by marble shaft planted deep in the earth or resting on the surer foundation of the grateful heart, they are an inspiration and a guide. Their effort is not stayed. Their works are not silenced by death.

"The Captive's oar may pause upon the galley,  
The soldier sleep beneath his plumed crest,  
And Peace may fold her wings o'er hill and valley,  
But thou, O Patriot, must not take thy rest."

—S. J. CHADWICK.