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Title: "The Bastille- Sixty Four Years Ago," by James M. Shearer

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The Bastille - Sixty-four Years ago.

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Revolution has so often clogged the wheels of government in France that it seems almost to be the rule and tranquillity the exception. In no other nation are the minds of the masses so easily changed, or so easily subjected by the blind impetus of the moment. To-day, they build the altar of Liberty upon the wrecks of deposed royalty - to-morrow re-instate a talking throne over its fallen fellows. To-day the dust of the sleeping monarchs of St. Denis is scattered to the four winds of Heaven and their living representative despised - to-morrow some trivial decoration on his garment excites the deafening applause of his subjects, while the next day again changes the scene to the scaffold. In a nation where Religion is a mockery, and Virtue to be bought and sold - where Vice and Folly reign supreme, and the brazen shrine of Fashion draws more impassioned worshippers than the sacred courts of the Most High, all this can easily be accounted for. "The hopes of the republican" says another, we may add of the monarchist too are dreams idle, shadowy and fatal unless sustained by the faith of the Christian; the patriotism is false which leans only on earth: the ambition is mean, which pauses this side of Heaven: he cannot love his country who will not love his God, and

"He is a freeman whom the truth makes free
And all are slaves beside."

This day, sixty-four years ago, will be remembered in France while she has a history to tell. Upon it was struck the first decisive blow in that revolution, which four years afterwards, ended in a republic. The red libations that were this day poured forth, formed the prelude to the events

which sent Louis the Sixteenth with his youthful consort to the scaffold. It ushered in a period, replete with many great and heroic actions and gilded by many noble virtues, but blackened by crimes as great as ever fell to the lot of the historian to record. Mirabeau, the great leader of the Constituent Assembly, rose and fell — his resplendent eloquence lit the fires upon the altar of human liberty, and swelled the distant rumbling of the shouts of Freedom to the full-toned thunder of Etnean forges, but alas! some mighty monster, grim-visaged as the Medusa of Milton snatched him from the ban of human rights and sold him to prop up a falling dynasty. And Robespierre, ~~rising at once upon~~ sporting amid the wild-waves of insurrection, and wielding a power that caused all France to tremble at the sound of his name, was dragged in turn to the block, and thence borne away, "unwept, unhonored and unused," by the very men who had worshiped him when his star was in its zenith. The careers of Danton and Marat were as less tragical, and Desmoulins, overjoyed as the voices of his fellow subjects, above the storm of battle and the crash of falling barricades, proclaimed him the "First Apostle of Liberty", lived to ascend the scaffold and perish there the victim of the very faction he had been so instrumental in creating. It was a period when the mournful muse of another Sappho could hang her head and weep over the shame and corruption, the falling grandeur and the waning glory of his unhappy country. But she could still too her fitful sobbing, as amid that darkened waste her weariest eye would repose upon some such a spirit as Lafayette, towering up, bolder and grander and loftier, in his contrast with the dead level of mingled corruption and disorder.

But the fourteenth of July 1789, has been rendered more particularly memorable for the destruction of the Bastille. Its massive doors and iron bars had shut the light of day, and closed the busy hum of the world, from the victims of royal hate and royal suspicion. But when the sun of this day went down, those mighty barriers

could send no more loving hearts and bury no more noble
spirits in a living sepulchre. The wave of insurrection,
as it rolled onward toward that lofty pile, gathering strength
and volume, like the mighty snap that summer suns
hurl down the alpine steeps, swept it from sight. But

"What took the oft-repeated tale of strife
The feast of virtues and the waste of life?
The varying fortunes of each separate field,
The fierce that vanquish and the faint that yield?
The smoking ruin and the crumbling wall?
In this the struggle was the same with all!"

The Bastille fell, and far above the din of crashing walls rose
the shouts of the victors, as their unsated fury demanded the
blood of its brave defenders. But it was not the first time that
men were butchered in the name of humanity and not the
first time the flag of Freedom was unfurled where Death "rode
the blast." We can say with Wordsworth,

"Oh give great God, to Freedom's waves to ebb
Sustaining her Conquest, Advance and S'prise,
To sweep where Pleasure decks her guilty bowers;
And dark Oppression builds her thick-ribbed towers.
And grant, that every scepter'd child of clay
Who cries presumptuous, 'Here their towers shall stay,'
I swept in their anger from this affrighted shore
With all his creatures sink - to rise no more!"

But let the searing cannon be the "ultima ratio regum", all that
Freedom requires are light and knowledge, and her march will be
over thorns and scepters and crowns, free from the shock of battles
and unstained by unholy slaughter.

Here on this side the Atlantic, here in our own land - down our
banks shaded by "broad Potomac's hem of pine" and within the sound of its
rushing waters, in the halls of Mt. Vernon hangs the Key of the Bastille.
Passing strange! It opens and shuts its magic bolts at the will of a
tyrant - it is free in the land and the home of the free.

But France has still her Bastille - its gloomy walls and towers, black
as the evil genius who presides over them, reach up, wherever a tyrant's
throne is upheld by bristling bayonets. But Byron says -

" - never mind. 'God save the king!' and kings
I don't care about, I doubt if man will longer
I think I hear a little bird who sings
The people bye and bye will be the stronger.
The venient jaor will vince whose harness wing
So much into the raw as quite to wrong her
Beyond the rules of posting - and the mob
At last will fall sick of imitating Job."

Anna M. Stearns

Commencement Speech

July 14th 1853.

Commencement Oration of James M. Shearer, Class of 1853
Transcribed by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, May 2008
Edited by Chris Altieri, June 2008

The Bastile—Sixty-four Years ago

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