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A Word on Martyrs' Mistakes

A Woman's Comment on a Man's Sentimentality and
Long-Range Sympathy.

Lizzie M. Swank

1888

There should be no more of mere sentiment and gush concerning the martyrdom of our comrades from writers and speakers who claim to be fighting for freedom and justice. Either they believe in their innocence and the injustice of their sentences or they do not, and beautiful laudations and flowery eulogies do not set well with paltry excuses for their "mistakes" or vague suggestions that justice would have been better attained if their punishment had been a little less severe. What advantage to our cause comes from such conglomeration? A Talmage or Field could say as much. A Gary or a Grinnell could say they were brave men, they were intelligent men, they were men who seem devoted to an idea they thought a true one, and that their deaths were heroic, and yet not injure their positions in the least. Indeed, Gary paid them a compliment something like this.

Is a professed agitator assisting the cause by blossoming out in beautiful literary roses with a sharp thorn peeping from beneath every one? If he merely wishes to grace the English language let

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him choose another subject and leave our martyrs to those who believe in them.

“Our boys” were indicted and tried for murder. Because they held certain opinions dangerous to the existence of the privileged classes a perjured judiciary, against all evidence, sentenced and executed them for a murder of which the most malicious among them knows they were not guilty. Either one believes this is a monstrous injustice and a blow at free thought and free speech or he does not. If he does our martyrs “mistakes” have nothing to do with the question and should not be dragged in with their praises. It at least is not supposed that the “mistakes” palliated the terrible wrong or excused the class that took their lives. If one does not so believe let him abuse or keep a shamed silence, as do the powers that be since their mighty deed was done, and at least be consistent.

They made no “mistakes” in their public efforts for humanity; the very things which are deemed “mistakes” are what they clung to with all the glorious intelligence and determination of their grand natures to the last. They sealed those “mistakes” with their lives. They never retracted, or repented, or faltered in their convictions, and if one step in their course while toiling for liberty was a mistake, then that noble meeting of death, which the enthusiasm of their belief but intensified, was also a grand “mistake.”

And who is to judge how much of the truths of liberty they understood? “By their fruits shall ye know them.” When there can be shown a “wiser understanding” that has accomplished the work, that has spread the light, shaken society to its very center, and consecrated that work with a martyr’s death, as have these our beloved brothers, we will meekly bow our heads to that superior “understanding.” But not until then.