

POEMS, IV

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649293308

Poems, IV by James Russell Lowell

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JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

POEMS, IV

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IV.

BY

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY

The Riverside Press, Cambridge

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POEMS OF THE WAR

THE WASHERS OF THE SHROUD

OCTOBER, 1861

ALONG a river-side, I know not where,
I walked one night in mystery of dream ;
A chill creeps curdling yet beneath my hair,
To think what chanced me by the pallid gleam
Of a moon-wraith that waned through haunted air.

Pale fireflies pulsed within the meadow-mist
Their halos, wavering thistledowns of light ;
The loon, that seemed to mock some goblin tryst,
Laughed ; and the echoes, huddling in affright,
Like Odin's hounds, fled baying down the night.

Then all was silent, till there smote my ear
A movement in the stream that checked my breath :
Was it the slow splash of a wading deer ?
But something said, " This water is of Death !
The Sisters wash a shroud, — ill thing to hear ! "

I, looking then, beheld the ancient Three
Known to the Greek's and to the Northman's
 creed,
That sit in shadow of the mystic Tree,

Still crooning, as they weave their endless brede,
 One song: "Time was, Time is, and Time shall
 be."

No wrinkled crones were they, as I had deemed,
 But fair as yesterday, to-day, to-morrow,
 To mourner, lover, poet, ever seemed;
 Something too high for joy, too deep for sorrow,
 Thrilled in their tones, and from their faces
 gleamed.

"Still men and nations reap as they have strawn,"
 So sang they, working at their task the while;
 "The fatal raiment must be cleansed ere dawn:
 For Austria? Italy? the Sea-Queen's isle?
 O'er what quenched grandeur must our shroud be
 drawn?"

"Or is it for a younger, fairer course,
 That gathered States like children round his knees,
 That tamed the wave to be his posting-horse,
 Feller of forests, linker of the seas,
 Bridge-builder, hammerer, youngest son of Thor's?"

"What make we, murmur'st thou? and what are
 we?
 When empires must be wound, we bring the
 shroud,
 The time-old web of the implacable Three:
 Is it too coarse for him, the young and proud?
 Earth's mightiest deigned to wear it, — why not
 he?"