Facing the Conquerors

John Crews

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/civ_pubs

Part of the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
Crews, John, "Facing the Conquerors" (1900). Publications. 98.
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/civ_pubs/98

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Civil Rights Archive at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
Facing the Conquerors

July 6, 1863

You think you see a Johnny Reb or is it a Yankee spy? Neither. Wars for generals and boys. No good workman flourishes when men are bercerk to destroy. I left Ohio and home to build. I built sound and stout on these hills, including this house your horse is pissing on. See the Green home—down by the English church in the hillslope, the church Mary and the girls attend—three stories high and me and my men placed every brick to a straight edge.

Keep your silver; I want nothing to do with your contraband. I didn't come South to receive stolen goods, but to build sturdy beauty—like a good workman.

I saw those Minnesota boys hoist their colors over the courthouse. I neither cheered nor cried, just glad it's over. Now I can get back to brick. Ain't a house escaped shelling.

This damn war nearly wrecked me. I came along fine until the war came—building reputation for building strong and good. I had calls for my hand as far east as Jackson, south as Natchez and west as Hard Times. The war bugled an end to all that. Damn Davis, damn Lincoln, damn Pemberton, Grant, and all who monger in war, not brick.

Sure I made a buck or two, own this block this house is on and intend to own more, if this country gets back to sense. I didn't come South for nothing. I came to make my way with my hand.
I found a wife—solid Irish girl—
upon who I've bred a few girls,
including little Allie who spit at you
when you rode up. I've got to provide
for them all, including the boys.
I intend to have on her, boys.
I'll turn into good builders some day,
who'll rebuild this place and learn to love it,
like I have, with my hand. God
blesses builders, don't he Allie?

I felt sure of Mary from the start,
out of Ireland and the famine.
Clean face, lean body, I knew she
would hold up like a building meant
to last. We courted. More I saw, more I liked.
I promised her love and work—stuck by
the promise. Did well—plenty of work—
bought property and prospered, by hand.
Then the war. But I intend to build back.

Sister Betty is sturdy as hickory—
'I'm afraid of nothing. I've seen her saunter
to the cave amid the shelling, talking
with her friends in Ireland. I'm a plain man,
believing what I see, touch, and do,
but if anyone has second sight,
I'd say she has. She told of talking
to Uncle Benny—he at her side.
Weeks later they got word he was dead
in Ireland. Strange but I believe her.

I'm not much on church, not against it,
just not much on it. I believe it's religious
to plant beauty around in houses.
God scatters beauty about, so do I.
It don't make me a saint, just one
careful what he puts up in the world.

I built caves for a while to help
and to make change. First I thought
it beneath me, then saw it could be done
with skill and art. The best I made was
for Mr. Porterfield on Klein Street.
Go look at it sometime, five rooms: parlor, cooking area, two bedrooms, and servant quarters. Smaller and neater is the one I built across the street for the family. If you have a minute I'll show it you . . . . Here, watch your head. It's not built for you tall people. It's tight, every inch counts, the way all things should be built.

I've seen 'em packed in the caves like sardines, black and white: crying and moaning; woman in labor gave birth to William Siege Green; wounded soldiers. They can be bad about mosquitoes. Those niches hold books and candles. old See that/ Spanish bastard walked by? They tell he's fathered many a child—twenty, some say— including one at seventy-three on his thirty-year-old wife. There's lot of mortar in the old man yet.

What's got into me? Never talked so much, never jumped about so in speech before—starved for an old familiar face, I guess. No mistaking, you belong to Pren Methan—face and build. Even though you brought us defeat, you also blew this siege away.

Jews don't bother me none. Most of 'em I've seen produce and pay, like Kahn. They endured the hell of the siege like the rest of us, didn't whine any more than the rest of us and cheated less than most of us, from what I saw.

Flawed fortification—engineers have overbuilt, making Vicksburg an entrenched camp, but doing little to control the river, to plunge shell on enemy (I hate that word) ships, keep them from running the batteries—blockheads.
Vicksburg was desolated, deserted for nearly two years—little construction but trenches and pits and that bungled.

I saw a sickening sight the first of the siege: darkness lit up by burning houses all along our lines—handsome country residences I and others built, burnt to clear the view for firing—war logic.

Tell me something. I knew your father back in Ohio—good stock, hard working, never stole a nail.
Tell me something. What gives you the right to steal and plunder from helpless people? You didn't learn that from your father, I know.
I heard tales of stealing plate and silver and burning homes, but thought that's what they were jest tales against the other side that are always told during war. But you show they're more than made up. Who taught you this, that firebrand Sherman? Now I believe those stories—I thought wild—burning Jackson and Raymond. Not a drop of beauty in him, burning like that. That Spaniard Bandas more civilized than him, and Sherman an Ohio man.
I can't believe it. I guess I don't understand war. It's one thing to fire a rifle, another to fire a home.
A town in flames! Think how much sweat and care you destroy. Your father wouldn't of. Lemme tell you something, and your friends too. You can't build a country burning and pillaging any more than you can build a house with match and crowbar. When you have a fire you have to build back. I hope you're smart enough to be a builder. God loves builders, don't he Allie? Don't spit again, honey.
Tell your father I remember him well, quick and skill hand. Tell him there's good people down here, and bad, like back in Ohio.
Send us the quick and skilled, not pillager.

John Crews