

The Vacant Chair

George Root



- 1, We shall meet, but we shall miss him.
There will be one vacant chair.
We shall linger to caress him
While we breathe our evening prayer;
When a year ago we gathered,
Joy was in his mild blue eye,
But a golden chord is severed
And our hopes in ruin lie.

Chorus

We shall meet, but we shall miss him.
There will be one vacant chair.
We shall linger to caress him
While we breathe our evening prayer.

2. At our fireside, sad and lonely,
Often will the bosom swell,
At remembrance of the story
How our noble Willie fell;
How he strove to bear our banner
Through the thickest of the fight
And uphold our country's honor
In the strength of manhood's night.

Chorus

3. True, they tell us wreaths of glory
Ever more will deck his brow,
But this soothes the anguish only
Sweeping o'er our heartstrings now.
Sleep today, Oh early fallen,
In thy green and narrow bed,
Dirges from the pine and cypress,
Mingle with the tears we shed.

Chorus

"The Vacant Chair" was a Civil War poem written by Henry S. Washburn and set to music by George Root in 1862. It provides an example of a song from the home-front perspective. The melancholy song mourns the loss of a son and remembrance of 'how our noble Willie fell'. This is a reference to Second Lieutenant John William Grout, whose death at the Battle of Ball's Bluff in 1861 inspired Washburn's lyrics. The image of 'the vacant chair' signifies the empty space Grout's absence left as the family gathered for Thanksgiving.

The melody, for me, brings to mind "Let the Lower Lights Be Burning", a hymn written by Philip P. Bliss in 1871. In 1864 he went to Chicago in the employ of Dr. George F. Root, the musician, where he was engaged in conducting musical Institutes, and in composing Sunday School melodies. Maybe there is a connection between the two melodies.

"The Vacant Chair" was recorded by Tennessee Ernie Ford on his album **Tennessee Ernie Ford Sings Civil War Songs of the North** which is where I learned it.

Other Civil War era songs in this collection are:

"The Bonnie Blue Flag"

"Dixie"

"The Faded Coat of Blue"

"Goober Peas"

"Just Before the Battle, Mother"

"Lorena"

"Marching Through Georgia"

"'Union' Dixie"

"The Year of Jubilo"