

VERSE: THE LESSON OF THE WAR

(1855)

"Legends and Lyrics--First Series" presents "The Lesson of the War (1855)," a verse that paints a vivid image of England during a time of war. The nation is depicted in a state of collective suspense and unity, irrespective of social class or background, as it awaits news from the Crimean front. The opening lines introduce a feast spread across England, not just for celebration but as a gathering that masks the underlying anxiety and apprehension felt by all. England is personified as a mother, nervously awaiting the fate of her children across the stormy seas, where some have been sent never to return.

The poem emphasizes the universal impact of the war, affecting both the rich and the poor equally. It speaks to the dread shared across the social spectrum—from the rulers of the nation to the peasants at their gates. This shared dread is rooted in the acknowledgment that the war spares no one, claiming lives from every household, leaving behind desolation regardless of social status. The fear of receiving news of a vacant place at the dinner table or a hearth rendered desolate by loss is palpable throughout the verses.

Unity and the setting aside of differences are central themes, as the poem highlights the cessation of party clamor and strife in the face of national crisis. The common purpose and sacrifice bind the nation's people, from the aristocracy resting under ancestral trees to peasants behind ploughshares, and workers diligently carrying out their trades—all are portrayed as having staked everything in a shared endeavor, their hearts and patience being the only defenses against the ravages of war.

The closing stanzas serve as a call to solidarity beyond the battlefield, urging a recognition of mutual sacrifices made by all classes. The plea for the ruling class to

recognize the toil-worn hands of the suffering and to acknowledge the universal brotherhood in sorrow highlights a desire for a lasting understanding to emerge from the war's adversity. The poem concludes on a note of hope, suggesting that should this lesson of unity and collective sacrifice be learned, the lives given in the name of England would not be in vain, imbuing their loss with a sense of purpose and meaning that transcends class divisions and personal suffering.

