

MEMOIRS OF A BUSY LIFE: BY JAMES RYDER RANDALL

The Author's Debut As A Poet And His Trip To South America.

THE AUTHOR OF "MARYLAND, MY MARYLAND"

This is the second of a brief series of reminiscient papers by James R. Randall, author of "Maryland, My Maryland." Mr. Randall is a native of Baltimore, but now lives in New Orleans.

When I was about 11 years old, at Georgetown College, the commencement took place. Charles Nathan Morse and I were participants in a dialogue, and were about the same age and size. We made quite a hit. General Zachary Taylor was President then and attended the services or ceremonies. He ha-me called to him, kindly patted me on the head and predicted for me a notable career. This was very likely a perfunctory compliment accorded to many others as circumstances required, just as Lafayette, when visiting this country, after inquiring of his visitors about their matrimonial or celibate state, hailed them as either "likely men" or "happy dogs."

At any rate, I early began to write verses, and before my fifteenth year was relied upon to contribute original poems for public exhibitions. When I was 16 years of age the illustrious scholar, Alexander Dimitry, of New Orleans, at the invitation of the college authorities, was induced to deliver a series of lectures upon "Greece." He was of the old Hellenic stock, in part, a very large, portly man, with a great, heroic head covered with a profusion of hair, which crested him like those classic figures we see of antique and heroic models. His countenance was swarthy and monumental. He had a resonant, sonorous voice. He awed us all and perhaps impressed me beyond the rest.

Under an impulse of admiring awe, I wrote the subjoined verses:

LINES.

[Suggested by the magnificent lecture of Alexander Dimitry, Esq.]

Behold the man! what matchless, godlike grace,
Is blazoned 'round his great, expressive face,
The voice, so full, so ringing, lordly grand,
Speaks from his heart the woes of that brave land
Which fallen now, once ruled the titled Queen
Of mind, of soul, all-seeing and all seen!
Nurse of the gods, fair freedom's blest abode—
The poet's pride—whence Homer's song has flowed,
Rolling with deathless fame from age to age,
The first—the last—the best on history's page.
Foremost in art, in science, and in strife—
In columned grandeur and in marbled life;
Bend, bend before Hellenic, towering might
Ye gifted vot'ries of the pure and bright;
All this and more he speaks—how silent all;
The mournful echo trembles through the hall;
In every breast responsive echoes breathe,
The ravished senses twine and unfading wreath
For those who fought for freedom, scorning
shame,

Then yielding life, bequeathed themselves to fame!
Thus not in vain he courts the willing ear—
Calls on the dead and living forms appear,
Both gods and men with awful grandeur move—
"The blind old bard," the "cloud-compelling
Jove!"

He bids them talk of days when Greece was free,
When Athens ruled the first, o'er land and sea,
Queen of the arts, as Empress of the mind;
Her sons, immortal, noble, undefined—
For who of men has fruitless dared aspire
To that supreme, that Demosthenic fire,
Which in one warning yet majestic cry,
Made stern foes quail and patriots gladly die?
When Sparta stalked the Liness of the shore,
With iron nerve—brute heart—what nothing more?
Ay, ay; a single boon kind nature gave,
One, to drag her from Oblivion's grave;
One hoary rock—the Keystone of the plain;
A shivered altar but a hallowed fane!
For heroes' blood has stained the sacred stone,
Dread, august sacrifice; this, this alone,
Redeems the land with a renewing birth,
Its faults forgotten in thy faultless worth;
Shades of the brave; thy blood's not vainly shed—
Oh, fierce baptism on a country's head;
Yet did'st that gore quench Persia's fiery pride,
And seal the spot where heroes fell—not died,
Leaving their deeds an heirloom to the free—
Unmold'ring record; stern Thermopylas—
Now turn again—exulting to the skies,
A temple flits before the captive eyes,
Unrivaled, chaste, e'en as the new-born day,
In perfect form it looms along the way
Unrivaled whole, unrivaled in decay;
Behold the Parthenon; all honored and all fair,
Look once again—'tis not—ay, yes 'tis there,
A wreck—a broken, desecrated shrine,
Its shafts encircled by the pois'ning vine—
Though plundered oft, earth's fairest coronet—
The mind untouched from a dismembered whole,
How gorgeous yet, thou Mecca of the Soul;
Yet language fails—fore him my senses flee.
A pigmy I—transcendent genius he;
What store of intellect has he amassed—
What glowing thoughts, surpassing, unsurpassed;
I will no more lest foolish, I create
More faint conceptions of the good and great,
Yet fly ambition, fly my puny path,
Where smiled ye once now concentrate your wrath.

Importuned to do so, I sent this youthful ebullition to the Washington Evening Star, with fear and trembling. It was promptly published, and when copies of the paper were distributed at the college a decided sensation was created. As this was the first poem of mine that had, so far as I recollect, seen the light in a journal of repute, the emotions created in my juvenile heart and brain were very vivid and tumultuous.

It was, with some other passionate convulsions, the end of my happiness as a student. I longed to get away from routine. I became melancholy and ambitious of worldly success in literature. The boys hailed me as the "Young Byron" and made me correspondingly foolish the more so, as one of the professors introduced the poems of the noble and unhappy poet as a textbook in our class, and that influence was not good for me, so young and so emotional. The naughty "Don Juan" had been cut away from the volume, but all the other poetry was left intact. Not in the same words, but largely in their spirit and form, I hisped:

And still the murmur of the Adrian Sea
Shall blend with Tasso's song wild thoughts of
—ther;

Thy shade shall gloom through old Ravenna's lair
Till even the forest leaves seem stirred with prayer.
And when the Future, envious of the Past,
Shall break the Argive's iron sleep at last,
Thy reverend name the Albanian youth shall keep.
Thy shape shall haunt the Ionian maiden's sleep;
Thy form shall linger by the Oread's hill,
By Love's own isle and Music's ancient rill,
And one dim halo, all unknown before,
Gild the gray waste by Missolonghi's shore.

Of course, Professor Dimitry was pleased at the tribute, looking at it with what may be called the fond vision of the heart instead of the critical eyes of the mind. Years afterward Mr. Thomas Dimitry, a son of the distinguished professor, brought me his father's scrapbook. My callow

verses, as originally printed, were pasted there, and on the margin was written:

"By James R. Randall, author of 'There's Life In the Old Land Yet,' the classmate of Charles P. Dimitry and his college friend through their still young lives. To each of them, who have devoted high powers, which might bring dollars and yet which have brought no more than conscious sense of intellectual superiority, I say: *Marte virtute puer; sic itur ad astra*. If you have any particular desire to keep particular companionship with the stars, well and good; but, my dear boys, butchers, bakers, shoemakers and tailors, who are not supposed to be violently admiring of astronomy, will every day pull you down from your empyrean to the realities of life."

"ALEXANDER DIMITRY."

As I grew, afterward, more practical, forsaking the muse, cultivating prose writing, warring on the Reconstruction monsters editorially and in Washington correspondence, making discoveries in hygiene and curious about all occult things, and eventually religious, the bitter truths and prophetic language of Professor Dimitry, newly revealed to me, did not morbidly affect my steadfast mind and soul, although I had, meanwhile, to pass through many dark waters and the shadow of death to reach the tableland of marvelous physical health and an undaunted spirit.

Two nearly fatal cases of pneumonia and, as I have hitherto stated, the adumbration—to use a phrase of Mrs. Wilson (Augusta Evans)—of early death made it desirable, by medical counsel, that I should take a sea voyage after prematurely closing my college career.

I went on a sailing vessel to Rio de Janeiro. While there, partly on horseback and then crawling up to the precipitous summit, I stood on the apex of the mighty Corcovado Mountain, which Sara Bernhardt, who had been all over the world, pronounced the most stupendously sublime and beautiful spectacle in the universe.

The picturesque metropolis nestled far below. The unrivaled harbor, with its majestic islands, gemmed the brilliant water. War vessels of many nations and merchant ships from every clime, dwarfed by distance, were arrayed upon the bosom of the water. Just across the bay was the stately mass of basalt called the Sugar Loaf sentineling the gates of the sea. The whole outer panorama was an amphitheatre of titanic mountains.

Convent bells pealed the angelus in muffled tones from many belfries and, being a festal day, the roar of cannon from 36 men-of-war came thundering up the lofty perch from the flank of the cliffs like, as it were, the detonations heard by Rip Van Winkle in the haunted Catskill range from the phantom gang of Hendrik Hudson's clan. On the wall protecting visitors from accident on the peak men of all tongues had inscribed their own names or those dear to them, and I carved one too, which probably remains to this day.

When I was 19 years of age, recalling dreamfully that wondrous scene while musing at my desk in a ship broker's office at New Orleans, I wrote the following poem, which may indicate some aspects of my mind and show how I was approaching toward my most popular poem in an evolutionary way, but in a totally different mental atmosphere:

EIDOLON.

Ah, sweet-eyed Christ! Thine image smiles
In its cathedral cell,
Shrined in the heaven-enamored arms
Of her who never fell.
And if my phantom eyes implore
A more benignant beam,
'Tis a nepenthe I would crave
For a memorial dream.

Dear Leonie! here didst thou kneel
That musky summer noon,
As the zephyrs sang their angelus
'Mid the dimpled cheeks of June;
As the sunlight drifted o'er thy brow
A golden wave of grace,
Bright-blending with the miracles
Of that angelic face.

Adorably Madonna-like
By this communion rail,
Thy raptured face, though rich with youth,
Was spirit-lit and pale.
And, oh! those opulent blue eyes—
Those Meccas of despair—
They—they were glorious Eden-isles
Lost in a lake of prayer.

Dear Leonie! I saw thee flit,
Gazellelike, to the street,
And pure, melodious angels led
Thy dainty, tinkling feet.
My rebel thoughts were petrel-winged
Attendant upon thee—
Chasing thy lovely, lissom shape
As arabs of the sea.

Long did I love thee, belle Creole,
As Gebirs love the sun;
And in the temple of my soul
Thou wast the Eidolon!
Long did I love thee, belle Creole,
Where corsair billows rise
And where the silver planets soar
In unfamiliar skies.

Dark Corcovado! Did I not,
With heart and soul aflame,
Carve on thy broad, monarchal brow
Her widely worshiped name?
Watching the homeward ships go by
Before the nimble breeze
Till memory with them wept away
Beyond the tropic seas.

Years, years had died, and once again
I saw the spires of home;
Then, armed with an undying hope,
I stood beneath this dome;
But, not within the pillared aisle,
Nor by the sacred sign
Could my bewildered eyes behold
The loveliness of thine.

The sad November day had come
And eagerly I fled
To find thee where the maidens deck
The Kingdom of the Dead—
I found thee—yes, I found thee, love—
Beneath the willow tree,
With marble cross and immortelle,
And one word—Leonie!

JAMES R. RANDALL.