



LODGE VEGAS # 32

Albert Pike: A Master Genius of Masonry

By Bro. Joseph Fort Newton

MR. TOASTMASTER:--It is the privilege of the living to strive, as occasion may offer, to preserve the image of the great and good men of former times. Not less is it our duty to do so, that as little as possible may be lost of the precious heritage of our race. Fewer names would fade from their rightful place in human memory if we, who enter into their labors and reap what they have sown, were duly mindful of our obligation to the dead and to the advancing generation.

In this the centennial year of his birth it is doubly fitting that we recall the name of Albert Pike--the master genius of Masonry, its most accomplished scholar, its noblest orator, and by far the greatest artist who has adorned its temple in these latter days. No more beautiful spirit than Albert Pike ever lived with us or died among us, and tonight his words are fulfilled before our eyes, when he said: "I wish my monument to be builded only in the hearts and memories of my brethren of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite." He himself fulfilled those words by the beauty of his genius, the splendor of his character, and the high quality of his service to our order;

"For naught endures unless it stands Linked with a deathless poet's name."

Almost twenty years have now come and gone since the great figure of Albert Pike disappeared from the walks of men. Other men and other scenes have come upon the stage and many changes have been wrought upon the earth. Even in the city where he was for so long a chief ornament and distinction a generation has arisen to whom it is necessary to describe Albert Pike. And that no one may ever hope to do. One may recall the majestic figure, the noble head, the great and beautiful eyes that were the homes of genius and power, the face so full of benign wisdom, and the fine spirit that forever animated and refined a form at once colossal and symbolic. But no one can reproduce the personal and intellectual charm, the stately grace and rich humanity of that wonderful man.

Albert Pike has long been known to me as a poet of daring and eloquent melodies. In days that come not back it was my joy to read "Hymns to the Gods," in which as a youth he visited the altars of Greece, the holy land of the artist, and learned the holiness of beauty. We of the south recall his poems of "The Mocking Bird," the mystic queen of southern woodland song, along with his ringing lines proposing "The Magnolia" as the emblem of the south. Nor can any one forget those tender verses which set to music the loneliness and pathos of old age, as colors grew dimmer and the life grows heavier "Every Year." But more melting than all is his

little song to "A Dead Child," which brought a ray of light into one of the darkest days of my life.

But this week (*) it has been given me to see another Albert Pike-- a great artist of spiritual truth, a magician of form and color and words--the Michael Angelo of moral architecture. It is beautiful beyond all words. No one can imagine a more magnificent portrayal of the meaning of life and of what it is to be a man and a Mason. In token of this honor let me ask you indulge me in a recital of the story of Albert Pike, his personal history and his career as a Mason, with a brief sketch of his achievements as a scholar, his character as a man, and his genius as a poet.

(*)The address was delivered at a banquet following the reunion of Iowa Consistory, No. 2, at which the speaker received the degrees of the Scottish Rite, in 1909.

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Albert Pike was born in Boston, Mass., December 29th, 1809--the same day that brought Gladstone into the world, and like Gladstone he came of a stock noted for its strength and longevity. The Pikes came to this country from Devonshire, England, as early as 1635, and the family has given us many poets, patriots, scholars, ministers and jurists. Such was Nicholas Pike, author of the first arithmetic in America, the friend of Washington, and the planter of the liberty tree in front of his house in 1775, the branches of which arch State street to this day. Such was Zebulon Pike, the explorer, who gave his name to Pike's Peak, and died in battle in the war of 1812.

The father of Albert Pike, so he tells us, was a journeyman shoemaker, "who worked hard, paid his taxes, and gave all his children the benefit of an education." His mother was a woman of great beauty, though somewhat austere in her ideas of training a boy. As a child he saw the festivities at the close of the war with Great Britain, in 1815. His father removed to Newburyport, in the same state, when Albert was four years of age, and remained there until his death; and it was there that the boy was reared. He attended the schools of the town, and also an academy at Farmingham, and at fourteen was ready for the freshman class at Harvard. Being informed that he must pay the tuition fees for two years in advance, he declined to do so, and proceeded to educate himself, following the junior and senior classes while teaching school. He taught at Fairhaven and later in his home town, first as assistant, then as principal, and afterwards in a private school until March, 1831.

By nature Pike was a thinker and by genius a poet --large-minded, sensitive, high-strung; conscious of his power, yet diffident; easily depressed by unkind words, but resolved to be a force in the world. When life with its nameless hopes began to stir within him, he felt the austere restraint of his Puritan environment where poetry was scorned as "flowery talk," and where all wings were clipped. He began to long for freer air and a wider life, and in 1831 set out for the west, by way of Niagara, thence to Cincinnati and down the Ohio, much of the way on foot, to St. Louis. He went as far as Santa Fe, the scenery of the country giving color to the poems he wrote along the way. At Taos he joined a trapping party, and after going down the Pecos, he traveled around the head waters of the Brazos to the sources of Red river. This took him across the Staked Plains, and he was so worn by hunger and hardships that he was glad to turn east. After walking five hundred miles he reached Fort Smith, Arkansas, "without a rag of clothing, a dollar of money, or a single friend in the territory."

In Arkansas Pike cast his lot, teaching school in a tiny log cabin near Van Buren. While thus engaged he wrote some verses for the Little Rock "Advocate," and they captured attention at once. These were followed by a series of articles on political topics, under the pen name of "Casa," which attracted so much notice that Greeley used them in his paper. The editor of the "Advocate" sent for Pike, offering him a place on his paper. This offer was gladly accepted and in 1833 he crossed the river and landed-in Little Rock, paying his last cent for the ferriage of

an old man who had known his father in New England. Here began a new day in the life of Albert Pike. He learned to set type and to edit a paper, reading Blackstone at night, and never sleeping more than five hours a day. By 1835 he owned the "Advocate," but soon sold it, and after trying for a year to collect what was due him, he one day settled his accounts by putting his books in the stove. His own teacher in law, he delved deep into the volumes of Duranton, Pothier and Marcade, translating the Pandects of Justinian with the comments upon them of the French courts. After such studies, once admitted to the bar his path to success was an open road.

A tender little poem "To Mary" about this time told of other thoughts busy in his mind. He was married in 1834, and the same year appeared his "Prose Sketches and Poems," followed by "Ariel," - a longer poem, bold, spirited, scholarly, though marred somewhat by double rhymes. In 1830 he revised his "Hymns to the Gods"-- written when he was a boy-- and sent them to "Blackwood's Magazine." The editor, "Christopher North," not only accepted the hymns, but wrote a letter to Pike saying that his songs gave him first place among the singers of the day and that his genius marked him out to be a poet of the Titans. And yet Pike cared little for fame as a poet. His poet-soul was a well-spring of delight, and he seems to have cared only for the joy, and sometimes the pain, of writing. Most of his poems were printed privately for his friends, as though he were deaf to the tormenting whispers of the siren of ambition. Outside his inner circle he is known only by fugitive pieces which escaped from the cage and flew into the upper air.

In the war with Mexico, Pike won fame for his valor on the field of Buena Vista, and he has enshrined that awful scene in a stirring poem. After the war he took up the cause of the Indians, whose language he knew, and whom he felt were being robbed of their rights. He carried his case to the supreme court, to whose bar he was admitted in 1849, along with Abraham Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin. His speech in the case of the Senate Award to the Choctaws is famous in our annals, the supreme court adjourning to hear it, one of his auditors being Daniel Webster, who passed high eulogy upon his effort. Judged by any test, Albert Pike was a great orator--massive as Hercules, graceful as Apollo, a lawyer ranking with Grimes, Prentiss and Pettigrew, at once a poet and a man of action, uniting the learning of a scholar with the practicalness and bright eyed sagacity of a man of affairs, and above all gifted with the imperious magnetism which only genius may wear. By mistake he was reported dead in 1859, to the great distress of his friends, and he had the opportunity, not often enjoyed by any one, of reading the eulogies and laments written in his memory. When he was known to be in life and good heart, his friends celebrated his return from Hades by a social festival entitled, "The Life-Wake of the Fine Arkansaw Gentleman Who Died Before His Time." This event was duly recorded in an exquisite volume printed in August, 1859.

And then came blood and fire and the measureless woe of civil war. Albert Pike, though a lover of peace and a hater of slavery, cast his lot with the South and was a great soldier on its red fields. His lines written and sung to the tune of "Dixie" kindled all Southern hearts with fiery and passionate enthusiasm. He became brigadier general and was placed in command of the Indian Territory. Against his protest, the Indian regiments were ordered from the territory into Arkansas, and took part in the battle of Elkhorn under his command. This battle, fought against his advice, was a disaster, and he resigned from the army and returned to the law. To the end he regretted the war, so terrible in its human harvest, the result of an immemorial misunderstanding, and which stained with blood and tears a land where heroes sleep together.

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It was in 1850 that Albert Pike entered the Masonic order, and rapidly advanced to its highest honors. Some have expressed wonder that a man of such rich and beautiful genius should have devoted so much of his life to a secret order. But those who thus speak know as little of the man as they know of the great order which he loved and honored. Happy the day when this master artist entered our temple, for it was as a great artist that he conceived of Masonry, even as it was as a great artist that he conceived of God, of man, of the kingdom of heaven, and of our pathetic human life.

One may almost say that Pike found Masonry in a log cabin and left it in a temple. In his life as a pioneer he saw the Masonic lodge as a silent partner of the home, the church, and the school, toiling in behalf of law, society and good order among men, and he perceived its possibilities as a field in which to use his varied gifts for the good of his fellow man. No one ever discerned the mission of Masonry more clearly, no one ever toiled for its advancement more tirelessly. If he had done nothing more than write "Morals and Dogma," his name would be entitled to our lasting and grateful remembrance. That is an amazing book-- amazing alike for the wealth of its learning, the breadth and sanity of its teachings, and the lucidity and beauty of its style which not even Ruskin could excel. Its style, indeed, cast in the mold of classic simplicity, rivals in its grace and ease the noblest pages of man. No one can lay aside that book without feeling that he has visited the high places of wisdom and of truth, led by a master of those who know.

But "Morals and Dogma," noble as it is, was only a small part of the service of Albert Pike to our order. When he came to his throne in 1859 he found the Scottish Rite little more than a series of crude, incoherent, disconnected degrees, and six or seven of them consisted of the words and signs alone. At once he set about to recast the Rite and put it upon a higher level, writing those rituals and lectures which are so much admired, and which have been translated into so many tongues. Such a task gave free play to the artist-soul within him, from which his life and thought took form and color--his poetic genius, his sense of the fitness of things, his mastery of language, his faith, his hope and his dream. So he wrought, as Angelo wrought in the Sistine Chapel, giving to moral truth a form worthy of its beauty and meaning, and the imprint of his genius will never fade from the temples of this order. Nature, genius and culture

had fitted Pike for such a labor. The note of his intellect was beauty; its depths were the depths of beauty; and to the soul of an artist he joined a rich and warm humanity, which made him an ideal priest in the temple of fraternity. To his skill as an architect he added a parallel genius as a scholar, and to the altar of his rite he brought the lore of all the ages, the myth and legend, the sacrificial rites and sacred ceremonials of all the races. He was of those who believe in the utility of the ideal, in the spiritual meaning of life, in the moral influence of beauty, and in the efficacy of art to surprise and embody the elusive Spirit of Truth which visits this earth with inconstant wing and fleeting shape--

"Like hues and harmonies of evening,
Like clouds in starlight widely spread,
Like memory of music fled.
Like aught that for its grace may be
Dear, yet dearer for its mystery."

Such an artist, poet, Mason was Albert Pike. As Grand Commander he ruled not less by the divine right of genius and character than by the love of the bodies of his obedience--ruled with a stately and affable grace, wise in council, skilled in healing schism, fertile of inspiration, his one passion aside from the good of the craft being that he should never work injustice. Unforgettable are alike his dignity and his humility, the unpretentiousness of his mental and moral bigness, and the kindness that softened even the sternness of his discipline, when that sternness seemed like to vent itself upon the wrong doer rather than upon the wrong. Memorable were his encyclicals and allocutions, and his tributes to his friends--such as those to Robert Toombs and James A. Garfield-- written with the lucidity of Thucydides and the charm of Cicero. Urbane always, he was, at times, a master of invective and satire, as witness his papers and letters in the "Cerneau" debate, and his famous reply to the bull of Pope Leo against Masonry.

Companionable he was supremely, abounding in friendship, glorious in conversation, simple, frank, and lovable. His laughter, rich and ringing, none might resist, and his humor gave an added grace to his intellectual magnificence. For the frills and fritiniances of life he had a fine, a copious, yet withal, an amused scorn, and every form of pretense or meanness shriveled in his presence. He kept ever, until toward the end, his youthful verve, and there was a freshness of sympathy in him that was essential democracy.

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As a poet Albert Pike had the authentic fire, the vision and the dream, and he would be more widely known had not he had such scorn of fame. In "Fantasma," a poem in which he shadows forth his life history, he speaks of one who was young and did not know his soul, until the mighty spell of Coleridge woke his hidden powers. Coleridge was his master, as Shelley was his ideal, and while we may not say that he was of equal genius with those masters, it is to that order of singers that he rightly belongs. In later life heavy cares and sorrows muffled his song and his harp lay idle for many years. Near the end he took up his harp once more and sought relief from loneliness, in a poem entitled "Every Year," which for a blend of a pathos that is almost bitter and a hope that is undefeated has none to surpass it in our speech.

"Life is a count of losses,
Every year;
For the weak are heavier crosses,
Every year;
Lost Springs with sobs replying
Unto weary Autumns sighing,
While those we love are dying,
Every year.

"To the past go more dead faces,
Every year;
As the loved leave vacant places,
Every year;
Everywhere the sad eyes meet us,
In the evening's dusk they greet us,
And to come to them entreat us,
Every year.

In his lonesome later years Pike betook himself more and more to "that city of the mind, built against outward distraction for inward consolation and shelter." Then it was that he mastered many languages-- Sanskrit, Hebrew, old Samaritan, Chaldean and Persian --in quest of what each had to tell of beauty and of truth. By these he was led on to a study of Parsee and Hindoo beliefs and traditions, and he left, in the Temple Library, his fifteen large manuscript volumes, translations of the Rig-Veda and the Zend-Avesta--a feat to rival Max Muller. And there it may be seen to this day, all written with an old fashioned quill, in a tiny flowing hand, without blot or erasure. In the House of the Temple he lived attended by his daughter, and it was here that he held his court and received his friends, amid the birds and flowers that he loved so well. Old age came on with many infirmities, but he was ever the courtly and gracious man until April, 1891, when death touched him and he fell asleep without fear and without regret.

So passed Albert Pike. No purer, nobler man has stood at our altar or left his story in our traditions. He was the most eminent Mason in the world, not only by virtue of his high rank, but by the qualities of his genius, the richness of his culture, and the enduring glory of his service. Nor will our order ever permit to grow dim the memory of that stately, grave and gentle soul--a Mason to whom the world was a temple, a poet to whom the world was a song.

- Source: The Builder October 1917

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