

THE AGED BOOKMAN

The familiar figure of the aged bookman, or poet shall we call him, is now seen less frequently along the streets. The burden of eighty-seven years weighs heavily upon him. His back is curved so nearly double that the centre of gravity is almost beyond his furthest step, and this renders him liable to trip and fall at any moment. But, saddest of all, he is losing his eyesight, through cataract. Notwithstanding, however, all these bodily infirmities, his mind remains clear and strong as ever. In this there is an incalculable blessing, for with the inability to see to read, he now revolves in his mind all that he has read in the past, and benefits by a most remarkable memory. His reading, it may be said, for many years back, has principally been the Scriptures in the original texts—the New Testament in the Greek and the Psalms in the Hebrew. In these and other languages he has been largely self-taught. Contented he is at all times. Worldly wants only concern him when the actual necessities of life are in seeming danger of falling short. Of a strictly temperate habit, he at the same time holds a glass of good spirits in high esteem whenever it may be forthcoming. To his mind, when properly used, it is the panacea for all ills. An eggcupful is his measure—but this excludes water. He does not like water. If prevention be better than cure, then he believes that a wee drop taken neat will save an emergency. But again I would say that he is as little inclined to intemperance as he is intolerant of a law that would aim to bring in prohibition. He occupies a room of about the size of a trailer street car, in a cheap locality. Here he provides entirely for himself. On a little coal oil lamp stove he cooks his scanty fare, declining all offers to live by "boarding."

The same jackknife that trims his lamp peels his potatoes and slices his meat. At one time he lay upon the bare boards of the floor, save for some old garments spread under him, and his pillow was a pile of newspapers against the wall. Since then he has been induced to accept the luxury of a camp cot and a pillow. Until very recent years he disdained, even in this cold climate, anything in the way of artificial heat in his room. If the thermometer went down exceptionally low, and he happened to be occupied with sedentary literary work, he would find sufficient warmth by putting on an extra pair of trousers.

I propose in the following sketch to give something of the history of this simple-minded philosopher, who is known to few except by his exterior appearance, in the hope that some benefit may come to him through the publication. For the most part it will be in his own words, as I happen to possess some chapters of manuscript by him, written for me several years ago, under a certain form of cajolery; for he was for a time quite averse to believe that any interest could attach to items concerning his life, or upon matters calling for his opinion.

Mr. William Rice was born at the village of Thoresby, in Lancashire, on 21st February, 1817. In the manuscript referred to, he deals with his parentage as follows:—"My dad's name, William Rice, a Welshman, and a votary of the Rev. John Wesley. As to my father's pedigree, I am inclined to the opinion as to its more modern history it dates from the time of the ancient Britons of Wales, more particularly of the Silures of South Wales, when some of the Rices were kings of South Wales, but anterior to that period I cannot say any-