

WILLIAM RICE
Poet and Bookman



Biographical Sketch
and Portraits, by
A. Dickson Patterson



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WILLIAM RICE, BOOKMAN
(From a Painting by A. Dickson Patterson, R.C.A.)

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-

thing, whatever I may think, excepting what a certain poet has said, and said so admirably, videlicet :-

'How loved, how valued, once avails thee not,

By whom related or by whom begot,

A heap of dust alone remains for thee,

'Tis all thou art, and all the proud shall be.'

"As to pedigrees and ancestry, in one sense it is all vanity, for, as Shakespeare has also said so well, 'Heaven does with us as we with torches do, not light them for themselves, for if our virtues did not go forth of us, 'twas all as one as though we had them not.'"

"Now, as to the Woman, my mother, my dear mother, Angelle and Volcanic, I think her father was a Dutchman, a tanner; he dwelt by the sea, also in Lancashire; six foot two about in height; a nose like a bowsprit on a ship. His wife, my maternal grandmother, a Wright, and I must say, an admirable reasoner, a little woman, about five foot or so. Oh, how, as a boy, I used to love to hear her talk! My father's mother was a Scotch lady named Jane Millicent Stevenson.

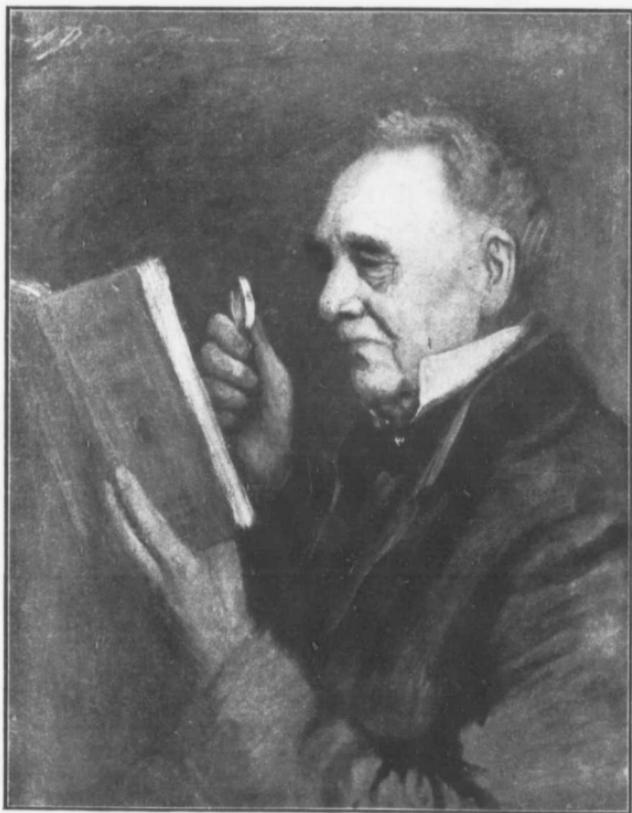
At the age of eleven years young Rice was bound an apprentice to a law stationer, and after a year, by the consent of all parties, he was transferred to the firm of Messrs. Balguy, Porter & Barber, eminent solicitors in the city of Derby, and on Mr. Porter and Mr. Barber retiring from the firm he went along with Mr. Bryan Thomas Balguy, for whom he formed a deep personal affection; he was the Town Clerk of Derby and the Coroner. With Mr. Balguy he served the remainder of his apprenticeship, and about a year besides.

His father at that time, being an excise officer in the Government service, had been ordered to Barnard Castle, in the county of Durham, and the son was left to live by himself while continuing his duties in Derby. "During that time," he says, "though very young, I can look back upon the time and think what a

steady, sober little fellow I was. I pitched into books, and as I intended to be a practitioner of the law, I made for myself at overtimes copies of every important legal instrument to serve as precedents. And also I obtained employment after office hours in writing legal instruments in similar lines. Also, Mr. and Mrs. Bemrose, who were booksellers and stationers, gave the job to me of transcribing petitions (popular) to the House of Commons, to the House of Lords, and to his most gracious Majesty the King, William the Fourth, 'the sailor,' in whose reign we had a regular row in Derby, the riot act being read by my master, surrounded by soldiers. . . After the passing of the reform bill there was an extraordinary rejoicing and a procession such as I have never seen. At the head of it was a man on a strong horse, dressed in a complete suit of steel armor, with drawn sword in his hand, and a little distance after a very large caravan containing a printing press, and printers, and as they progressed they printed a programme and distributed them (sic) to the crowd. The procession was immense. Whole oxen were roasted, and sheep, and there were garlands and bowers and shades of huge branches of trees, and such a to-do as was hardly ever seen, and the procession was wound up by a carriage containing the personation of Adam and Eve, almost in a nude state, and as if trees were springing out of the floor of the carriage. . . The reformation of abuses is certainly very important, and good government is extremely so, but if our human race were to be as eager for the salvation of the soul, how admirable it would be, and conduce to our entire welfare. . .

"After my father had been a resident at Barnard Castle for some time he was ordered by the Honorable Commissioners of Excise to the town of South Shields, in the same county, and, my apprenticeship having expired some time, and he becoming acquainted with a legal gentleman who wanted a clerk, my father wrote to me, and I sent him my credentials





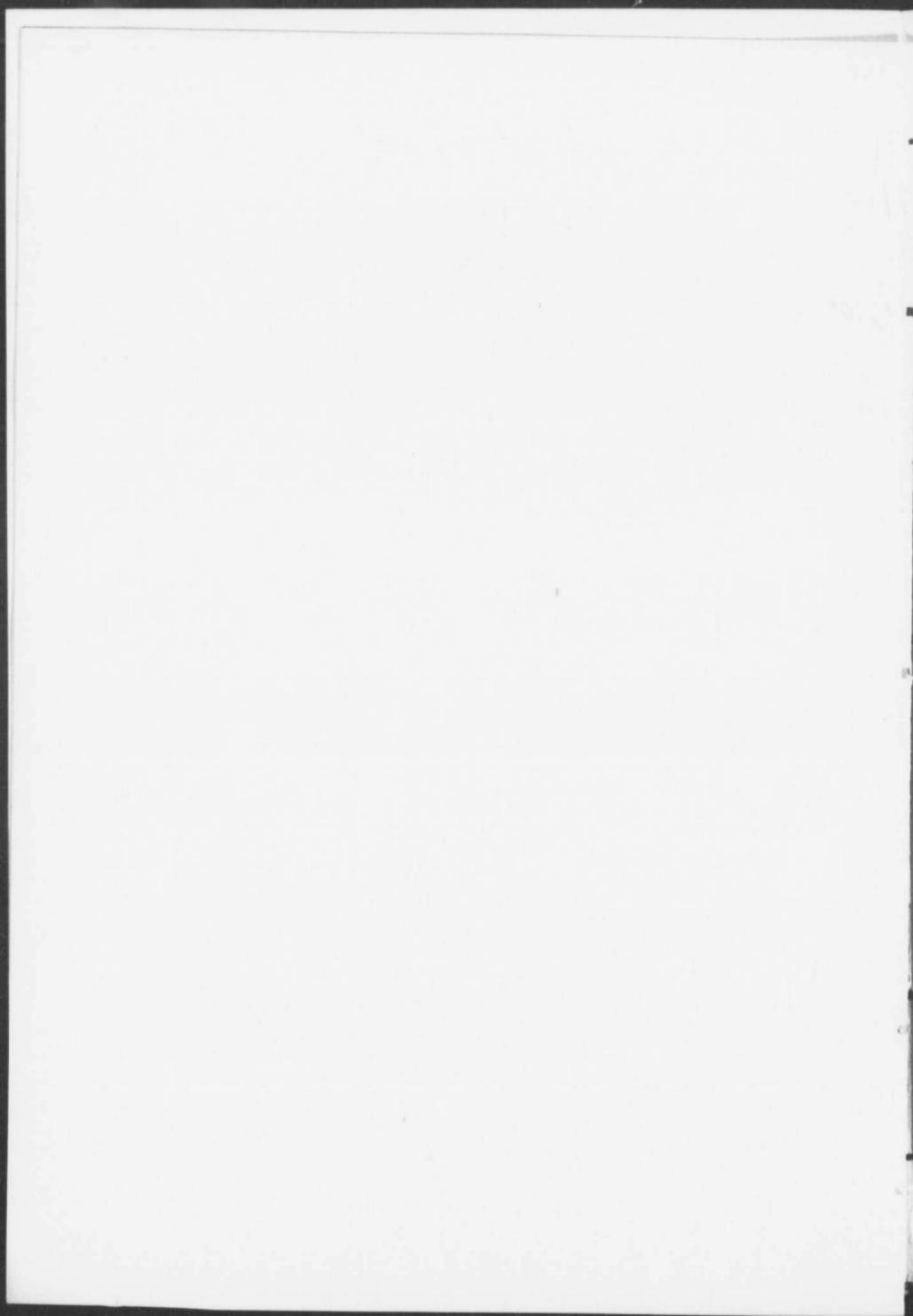
THE STUDENT

(From a Painting by A. Dickson Patterson, R.C.A.)



THE HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

(From a Painting by A. Dickson Patterson, R.C.A.)



obtained from my beloved master, and re-joined my dad and family at South Shields, where I became managing clerk for the gentleman, with whom I remained for the term of six years. On taking leave of my boss he put two sovereigns into my hand and wished me every success. . . .

"Well, now I got ensconced again into the vortex of law or jurisprudence, and during my six years' occupation I got a quantum sufficit of legal experience sufficient to carry me on to promotion to my heart's content, had it not been that my optics waned, and threatened extreme diminution. But I had not the least idea in the world of anything of a weakening nature happening to my eyes. On the contrary, I was like a vessel in full sail, with every inch of canvas set, sky-rakers, moon-rakers, jibs and all for go-aheadativeness in the law. 'Forwards, forwards, brodren,' as the Dutchman would say."

He then hits upon a quaint device for the strengthening of his eyes, and in which he found the good result, at all events, of gaining him the key to his knowledge of Greek. He formed the idea that to read a type to which he had been unaccustomed would be a good exercise for his eyes. So he entered a bookseller's store and inquired for a Greek Testament. Returning home, he mused upon the form of the Greek character, and concluded that it would be "a very good ophthalmic." He then considered that it would be necessary to get some instructions "to make an assay." Happening one day along a street of Dumbarton, he saw a card in a window, "Instruction given here in Greek and Latin." Entering, he bargained for a quarter's instruction of two lessons a week from a Rev. Mr. McIntosh. He appears to have profited very quickly by these lessons, and after a short time with the grammar was put to reading the Greek Testament. He had bargained for the Latin, too, and on being asked to read a chapter in the Latin Testament he was told that he had got as much

Latin as would be of any service to him.

It was about this time, in the year 1833, that, finding his inability to continue writing legal documents, owing to the condition of his eyes, he decided to quit the law and emigrate to America. He had prepared a lecture on "The Sublime and the Beautiful," which he intended to deliver in the States as something to begin with. On arriving in Philadelphia he found the population "as busy as bees in attending to the things of daily life." He was amongst a practical community, and, as he says, he cannot help laughing now at the subject he had chosen. So the lecture never came off. Incidentally one may say that the vessel he crossed in, the City of Glasgow, was lost on her return trip, never having been heard of, with some six hundred persons aboard.

To return to the eyesight. Mr. Rice is fond of referring to what he calls physiological alchemy, and he tells of how he invoked this alchemy in a most heroic treatment inflicted on himself. It is best told in his own words:—"Well, when by the before-mentioned means I had (grace a Dieu) succeeded so as that my eyes were become somewhat normal, about fourteen years thereafter a large white film began to cover my right eye, extending presently very rapidly, and I began to think that all my efforts were going to be abortive. I immediately desisted from work, and, having some money in my pocket (see the value of the use of money!), I went out and purchased some pounds of very fine sirloin, along with a heap of a great variety of vegetables, and a dollar bottle of Hennessy, i.e., good old brandy. I dieted myself on the substances after a fashion, which, I think, may be fairly called alchemical, though to give the idiosyncrasy of each kind of matter and its modus operandi or its way of being cooked or used would puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer. However, when I had got through all the substances I filled a big tumbler up to the brim of the spiritual matter, Hennessy, and, taking out of my trunk a clean pocket handker-

chief, I at once drank the liquor "ap strap and loup," and, lifting up my eyelids, passed my handkerchief swiftly across my eye, and the great white covering sloughed off (tea-totally), to my great exultation and joy. The brandy seemed to me to be like a squadron of soldiers when all the others in the field were nearly falling of victory, but, bringing up an additional force, turned the tide and secured a victory."

In submitting this biographical sketch of our old friend I am sorry not to be able to make use of all the material I have at hand, without overstepping the limits of space. I shall have to content myself with only a few further extracts from portions of his writings, giving his views on several subjects. I had asked him for his opinion on the earlier English writers, and upon the ancient classics. His remark is trite enough in saying that Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies, historical dramas and sonnets are the marvel of the world, and that England stands to-day unrivalled in the world for its authors. And as to Byron he says:—"I should include him in the number but for his accursed verse No. 47, canto 4, in the poem of 'Childe Harold,' " which gives an index to Mr. Rice's religious bias. As to Byron's versification he says:—"It does not require any praise, being full of poetic beauty, worldly wisdom, immorality and fun."

Of the classics he says:—"I entertain a high opinion of Homer, as far as I have read him, Bucolics, Georgics and Aeneid. Have also read quotations from Horace, Terence, the two Plinys, Cicero, and have had much fun from quotations from Plautus. But you must understand that my reading and learning, such as it is, has been for the most part obtained after daily labor. But now of all the classics I ever read, I regard the Bible of the Old and New Testaments in the Hebrew and Greek tongues the greatest, and a million times the best of all classics that were ever written, and only so far as they are obeyed will our world prosper and go ahead."

Whether bachelor by choice or through force of circumstances, Mr. Rice yet holds views upon love that are not cynical. He says:—"Love is a power pervasive of everything glorious. I do not mean that which is understood to be merely physical, but that principle of itself which reigns in all the noble sons and daughters of God, in heaven above and on earth beneath, and in all the inhabited worlds, the absence of which forms the abode of the alienated angels." He was not without his own love affairs. At the age of thirteen a wild passion held him for three months. The maiden was twice his age. With naivete he says:—"Of course it came to nothing, as I was a little bit of a snipper-snapper, and she was on the way to six feet, but very fascinating. I cannot tell, however, what it was that enchanted me. I suspect nature and imagination." And there were others. But ideally seemed to be the undoing of all these affairs. He calls it "an ignis fatuus that dances outside of all creation, and is calculated to involve itself in the enmity of the general run of men and women," and says:—"Hence the general poverty and misery of the persons endowed with that mysterious, confounded thing. It pesters its owner, and brings him into a state of perpetual anxiety for that which is magnificent. I do not mean for mere immense buildings or gorgeous trappings, but for the exquisite taste of things in conception and finish, moral as well as artistic."

Besides the selling of books on commission Mr. Rice in his younger days in the States and in this country added to his livelihood by working as a hired man on farms during harvesting. Of late years, as a citizen of Toronto, his stock-in-trade of books, generally obtained from the well-known establishment of Mr. Albert Britnell, which he carries in a brown paper bundle, supplemented by the bulging pockets of the many coats he wears regardless of the seasons, has made the man an object of more than ordinary interest to those who occasionally may have been his customers. A few years

ago a small collection of his poems was published. By these his name alone became known. In concluding the present agreeable task of adding something of his personal history to the introduction then prefaced to the poems, I feel that the old man and I are making our last bow, as of a "farewell appearance," and

I desire to thank one and all who have taken him into the favor of their kindly consideration, and who may feel prompted to join, in any degree, by contributing towards the support of him who is no longer able to help himself.

A. D. Patterson.

59 Pembroke street.

AN IOTA TO FANCY.

My Gipsy sweet, now greet mine ears
 With incantations from the spheres
 Most blandly mild, careering wild
 To soothe thy vot'ry as a child.
 Then raise thine eye unto the sky
 And such things there as thou shalt spy,
 Them straight to me, my fair, descry.
 Or take a turn into some dell
 And what thou seest there me tell ;
 Or lovers young, or linnets free,
 Or roses sweet, or cypress tree.
 Or on the sea spread forth thy sail
 To catch the morn or evening's gale,
 And as thou mayest push thy way
 To other shores that distant lay.
 But in a mad fantastic plight
 Play in the beams of Ether light,
 And sport in drops of crystal dew
 Of colors rich and ever new,
 And gaze on forms divinely fair,
 Such as not human mould may share,
 Whose looks are heavenly free from care !

WM. RICE.