

PAPER READ BEFORE
THE FILSON CLUB

OLD KING SOLOMON BY S. W. PRICE.

The Filson Historical Society

Old King Solomon.

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As one of the admirable sketches entitled "King Solomon
of Kansas" has been before the Filson Club
May 6th 1901

An essential constituent in the makeup of a community is that
one of its inhabitants should be conspicuous for eccentricity, but
respected for integrity and strong convictions. A lifeless of
character, independent of environment will not be itself as does
the principle of nature in gravitation or capillary attraction.

Though unlettered good common sense will be a sufficient pass-
port. What then of Hamlet in the land? Has not such a character?
Famed writers of the past and present have made them our friends.
William Shakespeare had his "grave digger", Washington Irving his
"Grip Van Winkle", Charles Dickens his "star gazing Mr. Macomber"
Edward Taylor Vassett his "David Rame" and James Lane Allen his King
Solomon.

OLD KING SOLOMON

BY

S.W. PRICE.

The importance given this Lexington character by by Allens has
beautiful story, enlarging the boundary of his fame, has naturally
excited in the writer feelings of pride that he has perpetuated
on canvas his features. Gilbert Searns was always an object of envy
because he painted "The father of his Country". Now the writer has
reason for congratulation that he painted "Old King Solomon" for
while Searns painted a president, he painted a King.

After the completion of the portrait and it was generally known
throughout the city, the number of callers from day to day to see
the work was such an interruption to the young painter that he con-
cluded to hang it in the office of the Phoenix Hotel. Soon after he
was persuaded by some of his friends to place it on raffle for the
amount of \$50.00 a volume. The father of the painter, being a

Old King Solomon.

As the hero of the admirable sketch entitled "King Solomon of Kentucky", from the pen of James Lane Allen, is the same personage who inspired the writers youthful pencil, he thinks it not out of place to tell what he knows about him with the hope that it will not prove uninteresting to the reader.

An essential constituent in the makeup of a community is that, one of its inhabitants should be conspicuous for eccentricity, but respected for integrity and strong convictions. Positiveness of character, independent of environment will assert itself as does the principle of nature in gravitation or capillary attraction.

Though unlettered good common sense will be a sufficient passport. What town or hamlet in the land has not such a character? Famous writers of the past and present have made them our friends, William Shakespeare had his "Grave digger", Washington Irving his "Rip Van Winkle", Charles Dickens the ever sanguine Mr. Micawber, Edward Noyes Wescot his David Harum and James Lane Allen his King Solomon.

The importance given this Lexington character by by Allens ~~has~~ beautiful story, enlarging the boundry of his fame, has naturally excited in the writer feelings of pride that he has perpetuated on canvass his features. Gilbert Stuart was always an object of envy because he painted "The Father of his Country". Has the writer not reason for congratulation that he painted "Old King Solomon" for while Stuart painted a president, he painted a King.

After the completion of the portrait and it was generally known throughout the city, the number of callers from day to day to see the work was such an interruption to the young painter that he concluded to hang it in the office of the Phoenix Hotel. Soon after he was persuaded by some of his friends to place it on raffle for the amount of \$50, \$1 a chance. The father of the painter, being a

strict bluestocking Presbyterian elder, having read the advertisement in the Lexington Observer and Reporter lectured him on the moral impropriety of thus disposing of the picture, enclosing him at the same time a check on the Northern Bank for \$50. Of course a dutiful son complied with his father's request. A few months

after this, being in pecuniary distress, the young artist wrote to his father informing him that "I am about to put old Sol up again. A hint to the wise is sufficient, for he enclosed another check for \$50. It is hardly necessary to say that he did not repeat these tactics.

To make a successful portrait it is essential that the inner man should be studied as well as the outward appearance. This rule the young painter observed in the case of Solomon. He was not long finding out his character. What his eye could not discern he developed by interrogation. Solomon's history and habits of life were not withheld.

Although familiarly known by the soubriquet of Old King Solomon, his real name was William Solomon. Why he should be dignified with this royal prefix is somewhat a matter of conjecture, as there is no record of his coronation. It is said it came about under the following circumstances.

He was employed in his early manhood to trim some shade trees in front of the leading dry goods store on Main Street in Lexington. In sawing the lower limb he cut himself off from the body of the tree, consequently came to the ground with the appendage. With much surprise after rubbing his shins he remarked: "How in the h--- could such a thing happen when I held on so tightly to the limb.

The wisdom displayed caused the bystanders who witnessed the performance to dub him with this *crowny* title. While this bodily fall of the modern Solomon was the result of inebrious cupidity yet it was no part of wisdom when Solomon of old permitted himself to fall from the high moral pinnacle into the abyss of sensuality.

whether the story is founded on fact or not, it at least furnishes material for a wholesome and instructive fable. The application of which, that one should be sure of his position on entering on a commercial enterprise lest failure might prove disastrous. As David Crockett once tersely but wisely said "Besure you are right and then go ahead."

Old Solomon was born in Powhatan county Virginia, in the year 1775, and came to Lexington, Ky. when but a lad and alone.

It was with pride that he claimed that "Harry" as he familiarly called the sage of Ashland, had come from the same part of Virginia, and they had been boys together; although he admitted that since they had grown up that his career was less elevated than that of his friend, as his occupation had been that of digging cellars. In politics he was always a firm Whig, as he said his father was before him; he had hated the British, and went for the American system.

Although possessed of no worldly goods except the old tattered clothes he wore on his back, he was about as independent a voter as was in the County. No politician ever attempted to directly buy his vote. The intrigue of the most adroit were baffled when indirect measures were resorted to. Mr. Robert Wickliff Jr. known as "Young Duke" when a candidate for congress in the seventh district, tried ~~tried~~ in this indirect way to corrupt him: It was during the election, and near the close of the polls on the third day (at that time three days elections was held) that the candidate, feeling somewhat anxious about the result, started out in quest of floaters, in his perambulation he chanced to meet Solomon. Thinking he would make easy prey he took him to the nearest saloon, which visit required but little persuasion. After drinking to each others health, the would be Congressman presented Solomon a small sum of paper money which was accepted with humble acknowledgement. While received by

whether the subject of this sketch as above referred to was brought under this law. He was arrested by a County Officer, tried before

him as a freewill offering, it was not so intended by the donor, for he immediately asked whether he had voted or not?

Receiving a negative answer, the wily politician said neither had he cast his vote; and as it was time their right of franchise should be exercised, proposed to his supposed victim that he should go along with him to the polls for that purpose. It was readily agreed to, as Solomon said that by waiting "he didn't believe he could improve his company." The polls reached Mr. Solomons vote was recorded for the Whig candidate, Hon. Garret Davis. After the Democratic candidate's was cast they proceeded together outside of the court-house. When the yard was reached the politician demanded a return of the money he had given. To which King Solomon indignantly replied: Sir, if you intended this money for my vote, I'll pocket the insult." So suiting the action to the words, thrust the hand which firmly held the money into his large coat pocket. He then walked off leaving the politician to reflect upon his folly. Wick-^{off} was thus made to appreciate the fitness of the subriquet his friend was known by, and found that while Solomon's body could be sold under the Sheriff's hammer, as a vagrant to the highest bidder, his vote was not purchasable.

The General Assembly of Kentucky in 1795 enacted a measure known as the "Vagrant Law". The necessity for such a bill was on account of the idleness and improvidence of many white citizens at that time residents through out the State. The Negro though subject to this law, was rarely a victim as it was to the interest of the master to keep him employed, and provide for his wants.

Had the Southern States such a law on its statute books and its provisions enforced at this time, the planter would never want for labor to cultivate his cotton and sugar cane.

The subject of this sketch as above referred to was brought under this law. He was arrested by a County Officer, tried before

a Magistrate convicted of vagrancy and condemned to be publically hired to the highest bidder for the term of nine months (that being the limit of service under the law)

On the County Court day following the trial he was put upon the block and hired by the Sheriff to the highest bidder who chanced to be a free colored woman known as aunt Charlotte her bid was a nineteen dollars and she was declared entitled to his services for the period of nine months. A colored friend of Charlotte's asked her why she purchased that poor white trash: her reply was "kase ~~the~~ white people own niggers and I wants to know how a nigger feels to own a white man". The experience was destined to be prematurely cut short, for ~~about~~ Aunt Charlotte was among the first who fell a prey to the terrible scourge of ^{the} colera.

Thus providentially restored to freedom Solomon graciously volunteered to dig the graves and to act as chief pall-bearer and mourner to the many victims. Why he should have been thus debased and sold into bondage has never been satisfactorily explained, for he was not a vagrant like the tramp of to day. He did not go from house to house begging food, but earned his bread and grog by the sweat of his brow. Excessive use of drink would at times incapacitate ^{him} for manual labor but when it wore off and he became sober ~~he~~ he returned to the pick and spade with characteristic energy.

He was never noisy or troublesome even when under the influence of liquor. Possibly it was from a sense of kindness and protection that the officers of the Law subjected him to this indignity thinking the humility and publicity would produce a reform. It may have had the desired effect for it is satisfactory to know that in after years his spree were less frequent.

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It would be a good thing for the South if such a law ^{was now} ~~was~~ on the statute book for the planter would have an abundance of service to cultivate his cotton and sugar cane.

Though naturally of a social disposition he did not care to form new friendships, being satisfied with the companionship of a few trusted friends. While he felt the inconvenience of poverty, he never seemed to envy those whose financial circumstances were better than his own, and was not ashamed of his humble position. If he ever desired to obtain a higher plane his habits of intemperance were a serious drawback. Indifferent as he was to his outward appearance, and in spite of his fondness for grog, he was not wanting in self respect, not insensible to ridicule; ~~for the older people respected him, and their children were taught to do the same~~ the writer
This quality in his nature ^{G.P.} soon found out when he was brought to ^{the} him by Mayor Douette, the son of Kentucky's great artist. When mayor proposed for him to sit for his portrait, he indignantly refused, as he did not appreciate the motive which prompted the request. It was not until the artist assured him that his object in wanting to practice on him was not for ridicule, and that he would try not to caricature him as far as it was in the power of a novice to abstain. In addition he promised to keep him supplied with cigars during the sittings, and to keep on hand his favorite beverage, convenient for him to occasionally sample. The first two days he gave him a ration of each article to serve while in his presence. This arrangement being rather troublesome he concluded on the third day to intrust him with the entire supply of cigars bought for his use which about filled his pockets. The folly of this act did not occur to the artist until the following day when his sitter failed to put in an appearance. His broad grin and characteristic shrug when he was handed the cigars was then understood. It was seven days before he returned and when he entered the studio he wore the

same grin he had when he left. He made no apology for his conduct, but only thanked him for the cigars and said: "Never had a better time," that, instead of old stumps he picked up on the streets he had whole ones, and enough for himself and a friend. There was no object in coming out in the cold to see him, he said, except for something to smoke, and it was for that reason he came back. After this the artist was more guarded, lest he again be ensnared by the wisdom of Solomon.

His unusually strong mind, amiable disposition and integrity, would have made him a power in any community had he so desired, and bent his energies in that direction. The death of his wife which occurred a few years after their union, and the desertion of his son (his only child), when but scarcely out of his teens, may have paralyzed his energies and caused his dissipation. The kindness received at the hands of Aunt Charlotte, while a member of her household, was not an unfrequent topic with him. While he appreciated the humane motive which controlled her in her purchase, and the care of him as long as she lived, yet he claimed that the investment was not without profit to her, inasmuch as he earned for her an average of seventy-five cents per day. His sons treatment of him he never excused, nor did any one, especially after he had by means of practice of law in Mississippi, acquired a comfortable livelihood. The unnatural treatment of his son was, however, more than compensated by the kindness received at the hands of the city fathers.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken
at the flood leads on to fortune;

Omitted all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows, in miseries.

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This quotation may be applied to Solomon, for up to the time of the cholera he was but little respected on account of his dissipated habits. That he should be the city's ward, when once his herculean frame was so weakened by age that he could no longer use the pick and spade, was a deserved recognition of his voluntary services in digging graves for the unfriended dead, with no expectation of reward, during the dreadful scourge of cholera in 1833.

If accounts of this dreadful ^{pestilence} scourge had not been written, a sufficient data could be furnished by the oldest citizens, or their descendants, an account of which never failed to secure an audience.

^{It had} The dynamic power of a cyclone in its devastation, and like a cyclone it came without warning. It appeared in June, 1833, when Lexington's population was ^{about seven} ~~not more than~~ ten thousand, and its terrible ^{for} ~~scourge~~ ^{malignance} baffled all medical skill. There was an average of fifty deaths per day, and at the end of its visitation five hundred citizens had perished. So rapid was the mortality, coffins could not be manufactured fast enough; consequently, trunks and chests were used. Not having a sufficient number of hearses the bodies were carted to the entrance of the cemetery and dumped at the gate for interment. Because of the difficulty of securing grave diggers many bodies remained unburied for days. No funeral cortege followed the remains of a relative or friend to its last resting place, or after the body was lowered into the grave or trench, no clergyman was present to pronounce the solemn words ^{"Earth to Earth,} "Dust to dust, Ashes to ^{to} ashes." The scarcity of labor was due the exodus from the city, ^{All that could go} for both poor and rich that could get away, fled to the country. Whole families fell victims to the scourge. One family of nineteen perished; three of the leading physicians while endeavouring to save the lives of others succumbed to the plague and were buried beside their patients. A person in perfect health in the morning

would be in the hands of the undertaker by night. a striking illustration was that of whistling Simon; This soubriquet was apppyed on account of his great vocal attainment . He was content to sit all day in front of a store on a dry goods box whistling much to the entertainment of the passers by. On a certain morning mornning he began his occupation in the accustomed place and in the same blith blithful manner but before night he had fallen a prey to the epidemic and was a corps. The wife of Dr. Matthew T. Scott, then President of the Nothern Bank, was left to die, as every thing had been done for her that was known to medical skill, and attention given to other patients in the house. While thus left alone a servant passed through the room with a small pitcher of icewater. She asked the girl to bring it to her and with almost one gulp drank its contents. Reaction set in immediately and to the supprise of the physician her body was in a profuse perspiration, and in a short *time* she recovered. Cold water at that time was denied patients with fever believing it would hasten death.

It was thought that the mind in a large measure controled the disease and that fear or anxiety were ⁿcoducive to cholera. Three medical students to test this belief^e agreed to station themselves on Broadway at long intervals to intercept the janitor of the medical school as he passed early in the morning. The first student after the morning salutation remarked, "Uncle Ned, you are looking badly; are you well?" "Yes master, I's perfectly well". A few square further he was accosted by the second student, "Uncle Ned you are ~~le~~ looking horrible, are you well?" "I's not feeling so very well". And when he came to the last student he had to acknowledge he was feeling very unwell, and this cruel experiment resulted in the death of good uncle Ned.

The fatality was great^{er} in localities where well water was used Families who had cisten^{and} water in a great measure escaped. The ~~ge~~

germ theory at that time was not known. Had the well water been analyzed it would have justified the conclusion that the disease was due to ~~Solomon's~~ ~~the~~ ~~impurity~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~water~~ the impurity of the water.

Solomon after devoted and faithful labor during two epidemics *in Lexington* of colere himself fell a victim in the third visitation and died Nov. 27, 1854. A few hours before his death he expressed a desire to see the Rev. W. ^M H. Pratt, D.D. at that time pastor of the first Baptist church at Lexington. On Dr. Pratt's arrival at the bedside of his dying friend, Solomon requested him to see Dr. Benj. Dudley the eminent Lexington surgeon, and ask him to release the mortgage on his body. This mortgage had been made when in want of material ~~add~~ for a small amount of money. Dr. Pratt set his mind at rest by promising to pay the mortgage himself. Why he should be so concerned about his body after death when in health he gave it no thought is indeed strange. The philosopher in his appraisal would place very little value on the earthly tabernacle, ^{It is} about as little *value* as the chrysalis is to the developed worm.

The ignorant class hasten not the body of relative or friend to the grave lest there be some vital germ remaining after the ^{has} pulse ceased to beat. A notable exception to this is that of a ~~was~~ Western farmer, who when on a visit to the old world received a cable message from home conveying the information that his mother-in-law was ~~dead~~ ^{dead} ~~and wanted to know what should be done with the body:~~ ^{And what should} should it be embalmed, cremated or interred. The immediate response was "embalm, cremate and inter take no chances."

Old Solomon was buried in the "beautiful city of the dead" ~~where~~ ^{it} lay the remains of his friend Harry, and although there is no granite shaft to mark ~~his~~ ^{the} grave it is a satisfaction to know that his body was not consigned to the Potters Field. Peace to his ashes

S. W. Price