

When the "Master of Human Destinies" Knocks

Edmund J. James, president of the University of Illinois, rendered a distinct service to society when, in his baccalaureate address, he paid his respects to John J. Ingalls' famous poem, saying: "I do not believe that there is an equal number of beautiful lines in the English language which contain more unmitigated nonsense than Ingalls' 'Opportunity.'" President James told the graduating class that opportunities come in "a never ending procession." As a result of his protest Ingalls' verse has been widely discussed. The discussion will be helpful because of the necessity for stamping out the disposition to look on the dark side of things.

The lines to which President James referred follow:

"Master of human destinies am I!
Fame, love and fortune on my footsteps wait.
Cities and fields I walk; I penetrate
Deserts and seas remote, and passing by
Hovel and palace—early, also late—
I knock unbidden once at every gate.
If sleeping, wake—if feasting, rise before
I turn away. It is the hour of fate,
And they who follow me reach every state
Mortals desire, and conquer every foe
Save death; but those who doubt or hesitate,
Condemned to failure, penury and woe,
Seek me in vain and uselessly implore:
I answer not and I return no more."

Although for years these lines have been made conspicuous in every publication of Mr. Ingalls' writings, it is claimed by some of his friends that he never intended the verse to be taken seriously. A writer in the Dubuque, Iowa, Telegraph-Herald says, "Senator Ingalls himself recognized the poem as sophistical. He was a man of great talent and dashed off the lines one day while at his desk in the senate chamber. Impressed with the untruthfulness of the idea that opportunity knocks only once at every door, he threw the poem into the wastebasket, whence it was rescued by a page and through the latter became public. Justice to Senator Ingalls' memory demands that this narrative shall be kept in the record."

It would not be difficult to believe that the talented Ingalls meant what he wrote when he gave these beautiful lines to the world. He was not the only one in his time, prior to his time and since his time, who has taken the gloomy view that there is a "master of human destinies" who knocks but once at every gate and forever after turns a deaf ear to those who then failed to heed him. A greater than Ingalls took a mighty gloomy view when he wrote: "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 and in miseries; and we must take the current when it serves or lose our ventures." Also: "Who seeks and will not take when once 'tis offered, shall never find it more."

Going from the sublime to the ridiculous, Mr. Dooley framed a companion piece for the Ingalls classic when he wrote: "Opportunity knocks at every man's dure wanst. On some men's dures it hammers till it breaks down th' dure an' thin it goes in an' afterwar'd it wurks f'r him as a night watchman. On other men's dures it knocks an' runs away, an' on th' dures iv some men it knocks an' whin they come out it hits thim over th' head with an ax. But ivery wan has an opporchunity."

The "one time and out" idea on the opportunity question has been all too persistently cultivated. Neither is it difficult of cultivation in this day of conspiracies in restraint of trade and conspiracies against the lives of men. Now that man-made law would relegate to idleness and obscurity the man who has reached his fortieth year, it would not be strange if the Ingalls verse should appeal to the man who, although at the very threshold of life, finds his way to livelihood barred by the absurd decree of a system that treats man as a lemon to be squeezed and thrown away. But this man-made law can not long prevail if the greed and dishonesty to which it owes its origin are frowned upon by intelligent men, and the system by which it is enforced is stamped out of existence.

In the meantime, the efforts of men and women who understand that they owe a duty to society can not be employed to better purpose than in an effort to persuade men to remember that the sun is ever shining behind the clouds.

The newspaper poets are giving the shade of Ingalls something to think about these days. They are bringing hope to the hopeless by

writing in pleasing verse the truth about opportunity.

S. E. Kiser writes for the Chicago Record-Herald:

"Master of human destinies am I!
Fame, love and fortune on my footsteps wait.
Cities and fields I walk, I penetrate
Deserts and seas remote, and passing by
Hovel and palace—early, also late—
I knock a million times at every gate.
If sleeping sleep, if feasting feast, therefore;
Don't think my call portends the hour of fate;
I'll come again, whatever be your state;
I'll give you strength to conquer every foe
Save death. And if you doubt or hesitate
You may expect me in a day or so
To call again and hammer at your door.
I'll come a million times and then some more."

Walter Malone, another well known newspaper poet, writes this:

"They do me wrong who say I come no more
When once I knock and fail to find you in;
For every day I stand outside your door,
And bid you wake, and rise to fight and win."

"Wail not for precious chances passed away,
Weep not for golden ages on the wane!
Each night I burn the records of the day;
At sunrise every soul is born again."

"Laugh like a boy at splendors that have sped,
To vanished joys be blind and deaf and dumb;
My judgments seal the dead past with its dead,
But never bind a moment yet to come."

"Though deep in mire, wring not your hands and weep;
I lend my arm to all who say 'I can!'
No shamefaced outcast ever sank so deep
But yet might rise and be again a man!"

"Dost thou behold thy lost youth all aghast?
Dost reel from righteous retribution's blow?
Then turn from blotted archives of the past
And find the future's pages white as snow."

"Art thou a mourner? Rouse thee from thy spell;
Art thou a sinner? Sins may be forgiven;
Each morning gives thee wings to flee from hell,
Each night a star to guide thy feet to heaven?"

It was Robert Bruce who, resting in a ruined hut in the forest and considering whether he should continue the strife to maintain his right to the Scottish throne, obtained inspiration from a spider. The spider was trying to fix its web on the rafters, and was swinging itself from one eave to another. It had tried six times to reach one place, and failed. Suddenly the thought struck Bruce, "I have fought six times against the enemies of my country." He resolved that he would be guided by the failure or success of the little insect. The next effort of the spider was successful, and Bruce then determined that he would make the seventh attempt to free his country.

The most inspiring tales are those that have not been written; the most heroic deeds are those that have not been told; the world's greatest successes have been won in the quiet of men's hearts; the noblest heroes are the countless thousands who have struggled and triumphed, rising on "stepping stones of their dead selves to higher things."

What is opportunity? It is life. In the language of Bishop Spalding: "Our house, our table, our tools, our books, our city, our country, our language, our business, our profession—the people who love us and those who hate, they who help and they who oppose—what is all this but opportunity?"

What is opportunity? Ask who wrote the classic bearing that title and you will be told that it was the work of the talented Ingalls, who represented Kansas in the United States senate. But who can tell the author of that little verse: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again?" Yet the one who gave that fine note to the music of the world rendered service greater than any given by Ingalls; for where the author of "Opportunity" killed hope, the author of "Try, try again" revived it; where the one stood for the doctrine of death, the other stood for the gospel of life; where the one who believed that opportunity knocks and flees wrote a classic that, while adding to his fame in literary circles, contributed to the world's woes, the other penned a homely verse that gives hope and courage to the sons of men—a verse that has in-

spired the children of many generations and that yet lives in service to the world.

What is opportunity? Bishop Spalding says: "We find ourselves where we seek ourselves—in matter or in mind, in the low world of mere sensation and base desire, or in that where souls are transfigured by truth and love. Nothing touches the soul but leaves its impress, and thus, little by little, we are fashioned into the image of all we have seen and heard, known and meditated; and if we learn to live with all that is fairest and purest and best, the love of it will in the end become our very life."

What is opportunity? Some one has said: "Occasion may be the bugle call that summons an army to battle, but the blast of the bugle can never make soldiers or win battles," and the man who makes the soldier and wins the battle of life, follows the example of Andrew Jackson, who was known as "the boy who would never stay throwed."

What is opportunity? In a story of Chinese life, we are told that a Chinese student was attracted to the efforts of a woman who was trying to make a needle from a rod of iron, by rubbing the rod against a stone. This so encouraged the student that wedding patience and energy he became one of China's greatest scholars.

What is opportunity? Michael Davitt, one of the world's greatest figures, died recently. In all his life he had never known what real comfort was. So far as money was concerned he was born poor and died poor. As a lad he saw his widowed mother evicted from her small holding. At the age of ten, he lost his arm in a cotton machine while earning a livelihood for his mother and her family. At the age of twenty he joined the Fenian movement and for his activity therein was, at the age of twenty-four, sentenced to fifteen years penal servitude. After seven years of imprisonment, during which he was treated to all manner of indignities, he was released and began the work which culminated in the organization of the Irish Land league. At various times he suffered imprisonment. As one writer says: "Every moment of his life was devoted to the redemption of his people, to their material and intellectual advancement and through years of painful suffering, imprisonment, contumely and degradation he wrought courageously, unceasingly, for the creating of better conditions in the storied land that was the idol of his hopes and dreams."

Where was Michael Davitt's opportunity? When did he grasp it? How did he realize upon it? His whole life was one of service to his fellows and sacrifice to their cause, and when he died he left a will concluding in these words:

"My diaries are not to be published as such, and in no instance without my wife's permission; but on no account must anything harsh or censorious written in said diaries by me about any person, dead or alive, who has ever worked for Ireland, be printed, published, or used so as to give pain to any friend or relative. To all my friends I leave kind thoughts; to my enemies the fullest possible forgiveness, and to Ireland the undying prayer for the absolute freedom and independence which it was my life's ambition to try and obtain for her."

Surely "opportunity" fairly battered down Michael Davitt's doors, so anxious was it to be grasped by that faithful soldier of liberty. No need to say that with all its sorrows, its privations and its sacrifices, Davitt's life was a success; and no wonder that when he died men of every race and creed paid loving tribute to his memory. It was eminently fitting that this man, who lived for his fellows, should die with a message to love and to liberty upon his lips: to his friends, kind thoughts—to his enemies, forgiveness—to his country, independence! What a bountiful bequest and what a precious legacy! Dying as he had lived that testator seized his opportunity. During all his career he seemed destined to give where others seemed destined to receive. Service was his heritage—even as it is the heritage of all who would win from life its greatest prize.

"Rose-wearer and rose-giver,
We meet them both today,
One gathers joy, one scatters it,
Along the trodden way.
Which are you, little maiden?
The flower-crowned lass is fair,
But the one who scatters roses
Is the one we can not spare."

RICHARD L. METCALFE.