

# Albert Pike

## By Unknown

Albert Pike found Freemasonry in a log cabin and left it in a Temple. He was the master genius of Masonry in America, both as scholar and artist. No other mind of equal power ever toiled so long in the service of the Craft in the New World. No other has left a nobler fame in our annals.

A great American and a great Mason, the life of Pike is a part of the romance of his country. Outside the Craft he was known as a poet, journalist, soldier, jurist, orator, and his ability in so many fields fills one with amazement. Apart from the chief work of his life in Masonry, he merits honor as a philosopher and a scholar. Indeed, he was one of the richest minds of his age, resembling the sages of the ancient world in his appearance and in the quality of his mind. Those who do not know Masonry often think of him as a man whom history passed by and forgot.

Pike was born in Boston, Massachusetts, December 29, 1809, of a family in which are several famous names, such as Nicholas Pike, author of the first arithmetic in America, and the friend of Washington; and Zebulon Pike, the explorer, who gave his name to Pike's Peak. His father, he tells us, was a shoemaker who worked hard to give his children the benefit of an education; his Mother a woman of great beauty, but somewhat stern in her ideas of rearing a boy. As a child he saw the festivities at the close of the War with Great Britain, in 1815. When Albert Pike was four his father moved to Newburyport, and there the boy grew up, attending the schools of the town, and also the academy at Framingham. At fourteen he was ready for the freshman class at Harvard, but was unable to pay the tuition fees for two years in advance, as was required at that time, and proceeded to educate himself. Had he been admitted to Harvard he would have been in the class of Oliver Wendell Holmes.

As a lad, Albert Pike was sensitive, high-strung, conscious of power, very shy and easily depressed; but, ambitious and determined to make his place in the world. Always a poet, while teaching school at Fairhaven he wrote a series of poems called "Hymns to the Gods," which he afterward revised and sent to Christofer North, editor of "Blackwood's Magazine," at Edinburg, receiving in reply a letter hailing him as a truly great poet. Had Pike given himself altogether to poetry he would have been one of the greatest of American Poets; but, he seemed not to care for such fame but only for the joy, and sometimes the pain, of writing. Indeed, the real story of his

inner life may be traced in his poems, a volume of which was published as early as 1813, in honor of which event his friends gave him a reception.

In a poem called "Fatasma" he pictures himself at that time as a pale-faced boy, wasted by much study, reciting his poems to a crowded room. As his lips move his eyes are fastened on the lovely face and starry eyes of a girl to whom he dared not tell his love, because she was rich and he was poor. No doubt this hopeless love had much to do with his leaving New England to seek his fortune in the West. Anyway, it made him so sore of heart that the word God does not appear in his poetry for several years. Another reason for going away was the rather stern environment of New England, in which he felt that he could never do and be his best. So, he sings: Weary of fruitless toil he leaves his home, To seek in other climes a fairer fate.

Pike left New England in March, 1831, going first to Niagara, and thence, walking nearly all the way, to St. Louis. In August he joined a party of forty traders with ten covered wagons following the old Santa Fe Trail. He was a powerful man, six feet and two inches tall, finely formed, with dark eyes and fair skin, fleet of foot and sure of shot, able to endure hardship, and greatly admired by the Indians. He spent a year at Santa Fe, the unhappiest months of his life. Friendless, homesick, haunted by many memories, he poured out his soul in sad-hearted poems in which we see not only the desperate melancholy of the man but the vivid colors of the scenery and life round about him. Shelly was his ideal, Coleridge his inspiration but his own genius was more akin to Bryant than any other of our singers. What made him most forlorn is told in such lines as these:

Friends washed off by life's ebbing tide, Like sands upon the shifting coasts, The soul's first love another's bride; And other melancholy though.

Happily, new scenes, new friends, and new adventures healed his heart, and a new note of joy is added to his rare power of describing the picturesque country in which he was a pilgrim. In 1832, with a trapping party, he went down the Pecos river into the Staked Plains, and then to the headwaters of the Brazos and Red Rivers. It was a perilous journey and he almost died of hunger and thirst, as he has told us in his poem, "Death in the Desert." After walking five hundred miles he arrived at Fort Smith, Arkansas, friendless, without a dollar, and well-nigh naked. He was soon teaching school in a tiny log cabin near Van Buren, and, tired of wandering, his life began to take root and grow.

Again his pen was busy, writing verses for the "Little Rock Advocate," as well as political articles under the pen name "Casca," which attracted so much notice that Horace Greely reprinted them in the New York Tribune. Soon the whole state was eager to know the genius who signed himself "Casca." Robert Crittenden and Judge Turner rode through the wilderness and found the tall, handsome young man teaching in a log schoolhouse on Little Piney River. Charmed with his modesty and power, they invited him to go to Little Rock as assistant editor

of the Advocate. Here ended the winter of his wanderings, and his brilliant summer began among friends who love him and inspired him to do his best.

Pike made an able editor, studying law at night, never sleeping more than five hours a day – which enabled him to do as much work as two men usually do. By 1835 he owned the Advocate, which contained some of his best writing. He delved deep into law, mastering its history, its philosophy; and, once admitted to the bar, his path to success was an open road. About this time we read a tender poem, "To Mary," showing that other thoughts were busy in his mind. That same year he married Miss Mary Hamilton, a beautiful girl whom he met on a June day at the home of a friend. A few months later appeared this "Prose Sketches and Poems," followed by a longer poem; bold, spirited, and scholarly entitled "Ariel." His poems were printed, for the most part, by his friends as he seemed deaf to the whispers of literary ambition.

In the War with Mexico Pike won fame for his valor in the field of Buena Vista, and he has enshrined that scene in a thrilling poem. After the war he took up the cause of the Indians, whose life and languages fascinated him and who, he felt, were being robbed of their rights. He carried their 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, Webster passing high eulogy upon it. Judged by any test, Pike was a great orator, uniting learning with practical acumen, grace with power, and the imperious magnetism which only genius can command.

Pike was made a Master Mason in Western Star Lodge No. 1, Little Rock, Arkansas, July, 1850; and the symbolism of the Craft fascinated him from the first, both as a poet and scholar. Everywhere he saw suggestions, dim intimations, half-revealed and half-concealed ideas which could not have had their origin among the common craft Masons of old. He set himself to study the Order, his enthusiasm keeping pace with his curiosity, in search of the real origin and meaning of its symbols. At last he found that Freemasonry is the Ancient Great Mysteries in disguise, its simple emblems the repository of the highest wisdom of the Ancient World, to rescue and expound which became more and more his desire and passion. Here his words: "It began to shape itself to my intellectual vision into something imposing and majestic, solemnly mysterious and grand. It seemed to me like the Pyramids in the grandeur and loneliness, in whose yet undiscovered chambers may be hidden, for the enlightenment of the coming generations, the sacred books of the Egyptians, so long lost to the World; like the Sphinx, half-buried in the sands. In essence, Freemasonry is more ancient than any of the world's living religions. So I came at last to see that its symbolism is its soul."

Thus a great poet saw Freemasonry and sought to renew the luster of its symbols of high and gentle wisdom, making it a great humanizing, educational and spiritual force among men. He saw in it a faith deeper than all creeds, larger than all sects, which, if rediscovered, he believed, would enlighten the world. It was a worthy ambition for any man, and one which Pike, by the very quality of his genius, as well as his tastes, temper and habits of mind, seemed born to

fulfill. All this beauty, be it noted, Pike found in the old Blue Lodge – he had not yet advanced to the higher degrees – and to the end of his life the Blue Lodge remained to him a wonder and a joy. There he found universal Masonry, all the higher grades being so many variations on its theme. He did not want Masonry to be a mere social club, but a power for the shaping of character and society.

So far Pike had not even heard of the Scottish Rite, to which he was to give so many years of service. He seems not to have heard of it until 1852, and then, as he tells us, with much the same feeling with which a Puritan might hear of a Buddhist ceremony performed in a Calvinistic church. He imagined that it was not Masonry at all, or else a kind of Masonic atheism. His misunderstanding was due, perhaps, to the bitter rivalry of rites which then prevailed, and which he did so much to heal. At length he saw that Masonry was one, though its rites are many, and he studied the Scottish Rite, its origin, history, and such ritual as it had at the time, which was rather crude and chaotic, but sufficient to reveal its worth and promise.

The Scottish appeared in America in 1801, at Charleston, South Carolina, derived from a Supreme Council constituted in Berlin in 1786. For its authority it had, in manuscript, a Grand Constitution, framed by the Prussian body – a document which Pike afterwards defended so ably, though toward the end of his life he was led by facts brought out by Gould and others, to modify his earlier position. The Council so established had no subordinate bodies at first, and never very many, in fact, until 1855, a very natural result in a country which, besides having Masonry of its own, regarded the Rite as heresy. None the less Pike entered the Scottish Rite, at Charleston, March 20, 1853, receiving its degrees from the fourth to the thirty-second, and the thirty-third degree in New Orleans, in 1857.

The following year he delivered a lecture in New Orleans, by special request, before the Grand Lodge of Louisiana; his theme being "The Evil Consequences of Schisms and Disputes for Power in Masonry, and of Jealousy and Dissensions Between Masonic Rites" – one of the greatest single Masonic lectures ever delivered, in which may be found the basis of all his Masonic thought and teaching. Masonry, as Pike saw it, is morality founded in faith and taught by symbols. It is not a religion, but a worship in which all good men can unite, its purpose being to benefit mankind physically, socially, and spiritually; by helping men to cultivate freedom, friendship and character. To that end, beyond the facts of faith – the reality of God, the moral law, and the hope of immortality – it does not go.

One is not surprised to learn that Pike was made Sovereign Grand Commander of the Scottish Rite, Southern Jurisdiction, in 1859. He at once began to recast the Rite, rewriting its rituals, reshaping its degrees, some of which existed only in skeleton, and clothing them in robes of beauty. To this task he brought all his learning as a scholar, his insight as a poet, and his enthusiasm as a Mason. He lived in Little Rock, in a stately home overlooking the city, where he kept his vast library and did his work. In the same year, 1859, he was reported dead by mistake, and had the opportunity of reading many eulogies written in his memory. When the

mistake was known, his friends celebrated his "return from Hades," as it was called, by a festival.

Alas, then came the measureless woe of Civil War, and Pike cast his lot with the South, and was placed in command of the Indian Territory. Against his protest the Indian regiments were ordered from the Territory and took part in the Battle of Elkhorn. The battle was a disaster, and some atrocities by Indian Troops, whom he was unable to restrain, cause criticism. Later, when the Union Army attacked Little Rock the Commanding General, Thomas H. Benton, Grand Master of Masons in Iowa, posted a guard to protect the home of Pike and his Masonic Library. After the War Pike practiced Law for a time in Memphis. In 1868 he moved to Alexandria, Virginia, and in 1870 to Washington.

Again he took up his labors in behalf of Masonry, revising its rituals, and writing those noble lectures into which he gathered the wisdom of the ages – as though his mind were a great dome which caught the echoes of a thousand thinkers. By 1871 the Scottish Rite was influential and widely diffused, due, in part, to the energy and genius of its Commander. In the same year he published "Morals and Dogma," a huge manual for the instruction of the Rite, as much a compilation as a composition, able but ill-arranged, which remains to this day a monument of learning. It ought to be revised, rearranged, and reedited, since it is too valuable to be left in so cumbersome a form, containing as it does much of the best Masonic thinking and writing in our literature. It is studded with flashing insights and memorable sayings, as for example:

Man is accountable for the uprightness of his doctrine,  
But not for the rightness of it.

The free country where intellect and genius rule, will endure.

Where they serve, and other influences govern, its life is short.

When the state begins to feed part of the people, it prepares all to be slaves.

Deeds are greater than words.

They have a life, mute but undeniable, and they grow.

They people the emptiness of Time.

Nothing is really small.

Every bird that flies carries a thread of the infinite in its claws.

Sorrow is the dog of that unknown Shephard who guides the flock of men.

Life has its ills, but it is not all evil.

If life is worthless, so is immortality.

Our business is not to be better than others, but to be better than ourselves.

For all his strength and learning, Pike was ever a sensitive, beauty-loving soul, touched by the brevity and sadness of life, which breathe in his poems. His best known poem, but by no means his greatest, was written in 1872 entitled, "Every Year," in which this note of melancholy is heard: Life is a count of losses, Every year; For the weak are heavier crosses, Every year; Lost springs with sobs replying, Unto weary Autumn's 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. But the truer life draws nigher, Every year; And the morning star climbs higher, Every year; Earth's hold on us grows slighter, And the heavy burden lighter, And the Dawn Immortal brighter, Every year. Death often pressed the cup of sorrow to his lips.

Three of his children died in infancy. His first son was drowned; his second, an officer, was killed in battle. His eldest daughter died in 1869, and the death of his wife was the theme of a melting poem, "The Widowed Heart." His tributes to his friends in the Fraternity, as one by one they passed away, were memorable for their tenderness and simple faith. Nothing could shake his childlike trust in the veiled kindness of the Father of Men; and despite many clouds, "Hope still with purple flushed his sky."

In his lonely later years, Pike betook himself more and more to his studies, building a city of the mind for inward consolation and shelter. He mastered many languages – Sanskrit, Hebrew, old Samarian, Persian – seeking what each had to tell of beauty and of truth. He left in the library of the House of the Temple fifteen large manuscript volumes, translations of the sacred books of the East, all written with an old-fashioned quill, in a tiny flowing hand, without blot or erasure. There he held court and received his friends amid the birds and flowers he loved so well. He was companionable, abounding in friendship, brilliant in conversation, his long white hair lending him an air of majesty, his face blushing like a child's at merited praise, simple, kindly, lovable. So death found him in April, 1891, fulfilling his own lines written as a boy:

So I, who sing, shall die, Worn thin and pale, by care and sorrow; And, fainting, with a soft unconscious sigh, Bid unto this poor body that I borrow, A long good-by – tomorrow To enjoy, I hope, eternal spring in high Beyond the sky.

So passed Pike. No purer, nobler man has stood at the Altar of Freemasonry or left his story in our traditions. He was the most eminent Mason in the world, alike for his high rank, his rich culture, and his enduring service. Nor will our craft ever permit to grow dim the memory of that stately, wise, and gracious teacher – a Mason to whom the world was a Temple, a poet to whom the world was a song.

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