

The Orator

The formula for this story is quite simple. Just put one funeral oration, one gasoline water pump, and one electric generating motor together for 10 minutes. The result will be either a tragedy or a comedy, depending on how you look at it.

The day I tried it I had no intention of getting everybody excited. I chose the most private place I could think of — the engine room in one end of our barn. It was a windowless room with only one door and it was closed.

To explain why I was conducting an experiment, I must go back to certain events that led up to that memorable occasion. I say memorable because the hullabaloo it brought forth almost threw me into a case of shock.

Right here it should be noted that I wasn't the sort of boy who steps out of his cradle, announces that he is going to be a lawyer, doctor, or dog catcher, and starts right off toward his life's ambition.

I was the sort who has to grope around for years, feeling his way along, until finally, through trial and error, he gets a clear vision of what he is supposed to do in life.

One day I looked into the mirror and took stock of my qualifications. My hair was sadly in need of scissors. My eyes were set far back in my head and misty bright. My face was thin. And my skin had the sickly pallor of a dying ghost.

"Surely," I said to myself, "you're a born poet."

I got a pencil and a piece of paper and went down into the cove back of the barn. There, in the quiet seclusion of a scuppernong vine, I waited for the heavenly muse. While waiting, I munched a few grapes.

A mockingbird sang in a dogwood tree. Silvery minnows flashed in the stream below. A bullfrog sat and winked on the opposite bank. The setting was perfect for an immortal poem. But the only inspiration I felt was for more grapes.

I decided to try a new locale. I got up and took a walk. I walked until I was in the beautiful woods back of the Martin Home on the riverfront. I paused to sit down and rest in the shade of an old oak.

Almost instantly the muse was there pushing my pencil. The following words fairly flowed on to the paper held in my lap.

MARTIN'S OAK

Across the cove in Martin's wood
An ancient oak renowned
A thousand years or more has stood
The noblest all around.

Through all the years no wind or storm
Nor lightning's fearful stroke
Has ever wrought a mortal harm
Against this giant oak.

Upon its limbs so wide and strong
Gay squirrels chase and play
And happy birds with joyful song
Praise the glorious day.

For this old tree by God was made
A haven from despair
And all who seek its sacred shade
Will find sweet solace there.

So may in each succeeding year
God find it in His will
To add another thousand here
And yet another still!

I got up and walked home on a cloud. I was, without question, a great poet. I would have to let my hair grow down to my shoulders. I would have to live without food or water. Inspiration would appease my hunger. Adoration would quench my thirst. I would have to speak to my father about setting me up in an ivory tower.

When I entered the yard, I saw my brother Mark burning trash behind the store. I went to him and showed him my poem. He read it. He read it several times. Then he handed it back to me.

"Don't show it to anyone else," he whispered confidentially. "Just go to your room and get your things. I'll take you. It's a long way up there, but I'll take you. Just promise you'll go quietly."

"Go where?" I asked.

"To the asylum, you nut!" he shouted.

Thus ended my career as a poet.

But it didn't keep me down for long. I knew the Lord had something on earth for me to do. I had to find it.

One day I was reading a book about old Demosthenes. It told all about how he became a great orator. It said he could sway a city with his tongue. But as a boy he had to overcome an impediment in his speech. He would go down to the seashore and practice. He would put pebbles under his tongue and talk above the roar of the waves.

Suddenly I realized that my talent was in my mouth. I didn't even have an impediment. All I had to do was open my lips and talk. With a little practice down on the beach, I would be a second Demosthenes in no time.

My mother was delighted to learn that I was going to be an orator. She had visions of another Dwight L. Moody or Charles Spurgeon.

"You'll make a wonderful preacher," she said. She presented me with a new Bible and a copy of Pilgrim's Progress.

Pilgrim's Progress was too slow for me. I wanted something with fire in it, like Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty, or give me death!"

I hunted around in the Bible. I found John the Baptist. There was a man after my own heart. He could turn words into weapons that put his enemies to flight. "O generation of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" was something I could really shout across the river. I memorized that famous passage and headed for the beach.

I preached to great throngs of fiddlers. I preached to marsh hens and sandpipers. I even preached to an old poor-Joe. But he couldn't take it. He rose from the mud with a vulgar rasping in his throat and flapped himself as far away as he could go.

Then one day I read an advertisement in a magazine. A copy of orations by Robert Ingersoll could be had for three dollars cash. The orations, the ad said, were so beautiful people couldn't read them without shedding tears.

I saved every penny, nickel and dime I could get my hands on. I accumulated three dollars and ordered the book, requesting that it please be sent by return mail. It came in about three weeks.

I took it to my room and examined it carefully. I selected the famous oration at the grave of a child as best suited to my purpose. It was a real tear-jerker and wasn't too long. I sat up all night memorizing it.

The next morning before I left my room, I hid the book under my mattress. I didn't want to share it with anyone until I had tried out a certain experiment.

All morning while working at the yard chores assigned to me, I kept repeating the oration over and over in my mind. I repeated it at

the woodpile. I repeated it in the stable while milking Daisy. By the time I was ready to go to the engine room for my duties there, I knew every word perfectly. I was ready for the great experiment. For the first time, I was going to deliver a great oration.

One of my chores was to run the gasoline water pump every day to fill our 600-gallon storage tank. It was a one-cylinder Fairbanks-Morse engine that had replaced the hydraulic ram. It was noisy, but it could fill the tank in about 10 minutes.

Keeping the storage batteries in the engine room charged was another chore of mine. There was no public electric service in Bluffton. We operated our own generator. It was installed right next to the water pump. So every morning while the pump engine was running, I would start the motor and charge the batteries at the same time, killing two birds, as it were, with one stone.

I turned on the light hanging from the ceiling in the engine room. I closed the rolling-door. Then I cranked the engine and got it running smoothly. Then I started the generator.

I moved to the rear of the room, as far from the door as I could get. With the noisy putt-putt of the gasoline engine, and the roaring whirl of the motor, I felt that my voice would never be heard beyond the door, no matter how loud I shouted.

I imagined a baby's coffin at my feet, waiting to be lowered into an open grave. A minister was standing beside me. The deceased child's parents were seated directly in front of me. Scores of relatives and friends were standing around the grave. All eyes were focused on me, the great orator, as I began to speak.

"My Friends: I know how vain it is to gild a grief with words, and yet I wish to take from every grave its fear."

I paused and smiled tenderly at the bereaved mother.

"Here in this world, where life and death are equal kings, all should be brave enough to meet what all the dead have met."

I saw a sea of heads nodding approval.

"The future has been filled with fear, stained and polluted by the heartless past. And from the wondrous tree of life, buds and blossoms fall with ripened fruit, and in the common bed of earth, patriarchs and babes sleep side by side."

The nods were repeated. I began to warm up.

"Why do we fear that which will come to all that is and is to be? We cannot tell, we do not know, that the grave is the end of this life, or the door of another, or that the night here is not somewhere else a dawn. Neither can we tell which is the more fortunate: the child dying in its mother's arms before its lips have learned to form a word, or he

who journeys all the length of life's uneven road, painfully taking the last slow steps with staff and crutch."

Tears filled every eye. Mouths were expectantly open, waiting for more. I looked down at the little grave. Compassion was in my eyes.

"Every cradle asks us Whence? And every coffin Whither? The poor barbarian weeping above his dead can answer these questions just as well as the robed priest of the most authentic creed."

Amens rippled through the crowd. I lifted my eyes. I began to shout, defiantly.

"No man standing where the horizon of a life has touched a grave has any right to prophesy a future filled with pain and tears. Maybe this common fate treads from out the paths between our hearts in the weeds of selfishness and hate. And I would rather live and love where death is king, than have eternal life where love is not. We are all children of the same mother, and the same fate awaits us all. We, too, have our religion. It is this: help for the living, and hope for the dead."

I bowed my head and stepped back, so the minister could take over with "ashes to ashes, and dust to dust."

At that moment, the door to the engine room was rolled back, revealing my father, several of my brothers who had been helping him in the store, and about a dozen customers who had followed them into the back yard. They were staring at me with mingled pity and alarm. It was obvious that they all thought I was a raving maniac.

My father cut the engines off. Then put his arm around my shoulder and gently led me toward the house.

"I know you're all right, son," he said. "But I think you had better lie down and keep quiet a while."

My mother and Liddy, our colored cook, were standing at the foot of the kitchen steps.

"You poor boy," my mother said, putting her arm around my waist and helping me up the steps. "It's your liver. I know it's your liver. A good dose of calomel will set you straight."

I was too embarrassed to open my mouth. I went quietly to my room and lay on the bed. Liddy brought me a cup of tea.

"Drink this," my mother said. "It will help some."

I drank the tea. It revived me enough to enable me to speak.

"I was just practicing a speech," I said. "I told you I was going to be a great orator."

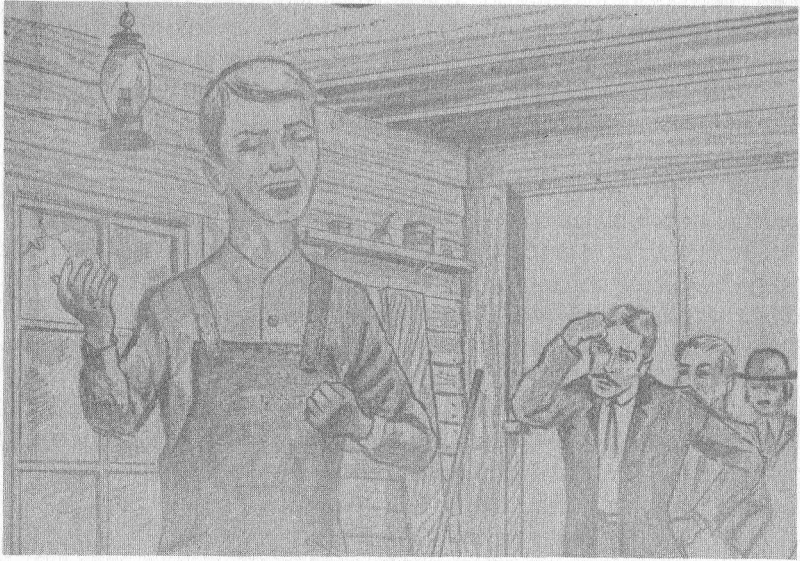
I reached under the mattress and pulled out Ingersoll's book. "This is where I got my oration," I said, handing her the book.

She stared at it for a moment. Then she flung it into the fireplace, as though it had been a poisonous viper.

"Burn it!" she cried. "Burn it, before your soul burns in hell! Robert Ingersoll was a child of the devil! He was an infidel! Didn't you know that? Never read a word of this again as long as you live! Promise me, my son! Promise me!"

I promised.

And thus ended my career as a second Demosthenes.



"Bluffton Boy" learns to his sorrow that his idol has feet of clay.