

VARIOUS

APPRECIATIONS OF
RICHARD HARDING
DAVIS

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Various Appreciations of Richard Harding Davis

R. H. D.
BY GOUVERNEUR MORRIS

"And they rise to their feet as He passes by, gentlemen unafraid."

He was almost too good to be true. In addition, the gods loved him, and so he had to die young. Some people think that a man of fifty-two is middle-aged. But if R. H. D. had lived to be a hundred, he would never have grown old. It is not generally known that the name of his other brother was Peter Pan.

Within the year we have played at pirates together, at the taking of sperm whales; and we have ransacked the Westchester Hills for gunsites against the Mexican invasion. And we have made lists of guns, and medicines, and tinned things, in case we should ever happen to go elephant-shooting in Africa. But we weren't going to hurt the elephants. Once R. H. D. shot a hippopotamus and he was always ashamed and sorry. I think he never killed anything else. He wasn't that kind of a sportsman. Of hunting, as of many other things, he has said the last word. Do you remember the Happy Hunting Ground in "The Bar Sinister"?—"where nobody hunts us, and there is nothing to hunt."

Experienced persons tell us that a manhunt is the most exciting of all sports. R. H. D. hunted men in Cuba. He hunted for wounded men who were out in front of the trenches and still under fire, and found some of them and brought them in. The Rough Riders didn't make him an honorary member of their regiment just because he was charming and a faithful friend, but largely because they were a lot of daredevils and he was another.

To hear him talk you wouldn't have thought that he had ever done a brave thing in his life. He talked a great deal, and he talked even better than he wrote (at his best he wrote like an angel), but I have dusted every corner of my memory and cannot recall any story of his in which he played a heroic or successful part. Always he was running at top speed, or hiding behind a tree, or lying face down in a foot of water (for hours!) so as not to be seen. Always he was getting the worst of it. But about the other fellows he told the whole truth with lightning flashes of wit and character building and admiration or contempt. Until the invention of moving pictures the world had nothing in the least like his talk. His eye had photographed, his mind had developed and prepared the slides, his words sent the light through them, and lo and behold, they were reproduced on the screen of your own mind, exact in drawing and color. With the written word or the spoken word he was the greatest recorder and reporter of things that he had seen of any man, perhaps, that ever lived. The history of the last thirty years, its manners and customs and its leading events and inventions, cannot be written truthfully without reference to the records which he has left, to his special articles and to his letters. Read over again the Queen's Jubilee, the Czar's Coronation, the March of the Germans through Brussels, and see for yourself if I speak too zealously, even for a friend, to whom, now that R. H. D. is dead, the world can never be the same again.

But I did not set out to estimate his genius. That matter will come in due time before the unerring tribunal of posterity.

One secret of Mr. Roosevelt's hold upon those who come into contact with him is his energy. Retaining enough for his own use (he uses a good deal, because every day he does the work of five or six men), he distributes the inexhaustible remainder among those who most need it. Men go to him tired and discouraged, he sends them away glad to be alive, still gladder that he is alive, and ready to fight the devil himself in a good cause. Upon his friends R. H. D. had the same effect. And it was

not only in proximity that he could distribute energy, but from afar, by letter and cable. He had some intuitive way of knowing just when you were slipping into a slough of laziness and discouragement. And at such times he either appeared suddenly upon the scene, or there came a boy on a bicycle, with a yellow envelope and a book to sign, or the postman in his buggy, or the telephone rang and from the receiver there poured into you affection and encouragement.

But the great times, of course, were when he came in person, and the temperature of the house, which a moment before had been too hot or too cold, became just right, and a sense of cheerfulness and well-being invaded the hearts of the master and the mistress and of the servants in the house and in the yard. And the older daughter ran to him, and the baby, who had been fretting because nobody would give her a double-barrelled shotgun, climbed upon his knee and forgot all about the disappointments of this uncompromising world.

He was touchingly sweet with children. I think he was a little afraid of them. He was afraid perhaps that they wouldn't find out how much he loved them. But when they showed him that they trusted him, and, unsolicited, climbed upon him and laid their cheeks against his, then the loveliest expression came over his face, and you knew that the great heart, which the other day ceased to beat, throbbed with an exquisite bliss, akin to anguish.

One of the happiest days I remember was when I and mine received a telegram saying that he had a baby of his own. And I thank God that little Miss Hope is too young to know what an appalling loss she has suffered....

Perhaps he stayed to dine. Then perhaps the older daughter was allowed to sit up an extra half-hour so that she could wait on the table (and though I say it, that shouldn't, she could do this beautifully, with dignity and without giggling), and perhaps the dinner was good, or R. H. D. thought it was, and in that event he must abandon his place and storm the kitchen to tell the cook all about it. Perhaps the gardener was taking life easy on the kitchen porch. He, too, came in for praise. R. H. D. had never seen our Japanese iris so beautiful; as for his, they wouldn't grow at all. It wasn't the iris, it was the man behind the iris. And then back he would come to us, with a wonderful story of his adventures in the pantry on his way to the kitchen, and leaving behind him a cook to whom there had been issued a new lease of life, and a gardener who blushed and smiled in the darkness under the *Actinidia* vines.

It was in our little house at Aiken, in South Carolina, that he was with us most and we learned to know him best, and that he and I became dependent upon each other in many ways.

Events, into which I shall not go, had made his life very difficult and complicated. And he who had given so much friendship to so many people needed a little friendship in return, and perhaps, too, he needed for a time to live in a house whose master and mistress loved each other, and where there were children. Before he came that first year our house had no name. Now it is called "Let's Pretend."

Now the chimney in the living-room draws, but in those first days of the built-over house it didn't. At least, it didn't draw all the time, but we pretended that it did, and with much pretense came faith. From the fireplace that smoked to the serious things of life we extended our pretendings, until real troubles went down before them—down and out.

It was one of Aiken's very best winters, and the earliest spring I ever lived anywhere. R. H. D. came shortly after Christmas. The spiraeas were in bloom, and the monthly roses; you could always find a sweet violet or two somewhere in the yard; here and there splotches of deep pink against gray cabin walls proved that precocious peach-trees were in bloom. It never rained. At night it was cold enough for fires. In the middle of the day it was hot. The wind never blew, and every morning we had a four for tennis and every afternoon we rode in the woods. And every night we sat in front of the fire (that didn't smoke because of pretending) and talked until the next morning. He was one of those rarely gifted men who find their chiefest pleasure not in looking backward or forward, but in what is going on at the moment. Weeks did not have to pass before it was forced upon his knowledge that Tuesday, the fourteenth (let us say), had been a good Tuesday. He knew it the moment he waked at 7 A. M. and perceived the Tuesday sunshine making patterns of bright light upon the floor. The

sunshine rejoiced him and the knowledge that even before breakfast there was vouchsafed to him a whole hour of life. That day began with attentions to his physical well-being. There were exercises, conducted with great vigor and rejoicing, followed by a tub, artesian cold, and a loud and joyous singing of ballads.

At fifty R. H. D. might have posed to some Praxiteles and, copied in marble, gone down the ages as "statue of a young athlete." He stood six feet and over, straight as a Sioux chief, a noble and leonine head carried by a splendid torso. His skin was as fine and clean as a child's. He weighed nearly two hundred pounds and had no fat on him. He was the weight-throwing rather than the running type of athlete, but so tenaciously had he clung to the suppleness of his adolescent days that he could stand stiff-legged and lay his hands flat upon the floor.

The singing over, silence reigned. But if you had listened at his door you must have heard a pen going, swiftly and boldly. He was hard at work, doing unto others what others had done unto him. You were a stranger to him; some magazine had accepted a story that you had written and published it. R. H. D. had found something to like and admire in that story (very little perhaps), and it was his duty and pleasure to tell you so. If he had liked the story very much he would send you instead of a note a telegram. Or it might be that you had drawn a picture, or, as a cub reporter, had shown golden promise in a half-column of unsigned print; R. H. D. would find you out, and find time to praise you and help you. So it was that when he emerged from his room at sharp eight o'clock, he was wide-awake and happy and hungry, and whistled and double-shuffled with his feet, out of excessive energy, and carried in his hands a whole sheaf of notes and letters and telegrams.

Breakfast with him was not the usual American breakfast, a sullen, dyspeptic gathering of persons who only the night before had rejoiced in each other's society. With him it was the time when the mind is, or ought to be, at its best, the body at its freshest and hungriest. Discussions of the latest plays and novels, the doings and undoings of statesmen, laughter and sentiment—to him, at breakfast, these things were as important as sausages and thick cream.

Breakfast over, there was no dawdling and putting off of the day's work (else how, at eleven sharp, could tennis be played with a free conscience?). Loving, as he did, everything connected with a newspaper, he would now pass by those on the hall-table with never so much as a wistful glance, and hurry to his workroom.

He wrote sitting down. He wrote standing up. And, almost you may say, he wrote walking up and down. Some people, accustomed to the delicious ease and clarity of his style, imagine that he wrote very easily. He did and he didn't. Letters, easy, clear, to the point, and gorgeously human, flowed from him without let or hindrance. That masterpiece of corresponding, "The German March through Brussels," was probably written almost as fast as he could talk (next to Phillips Brooks he was the fastest talker I ever heard), but when it came to fiction he had no facility at all. Perhaps I should say that he held in contempt any facility that he may have had. It was owing to his incomparable energy and Joblike patience that he ever gave us any fiction at all. Every phrase in his fiction was, of all the myriad phrases he could think of, the fittest in his relentless judgment to survive. Phrases, paragraphs, pages, whole stories even, were written over and over again. He worked upon a principle of elimination. If he wished to describe an automobile turning in at a gate, he made first a long and elaborate description from which there was omitted no detail which the most observant pair of eyes in Christendom had ever noted with reference to just such a turning. Thereupon he would begin a process of omitting one by one those details which he had been at such pains to recall; and after each omission he would ask himself: "Does the picture remain?" If it did not, he restored the detail which he had just omitted, and experimented with the sacrifice of some other, and so on, and so on, until after Herculean labor there remained for the reader one of those, swiftly flashed, ice-clear pictures (complete in every detail) with which his tales and romances are so delightfully and continuously adorned.

But it is quarter to eleven, and, this being a time of holiday, R. H. D. emerges from his workroom happy to think that he has placed one hundred and seven words between himself and the wolf who hangs about every writer's door. He isn't satisfied with those hundred and seven words. He never was in the least satisfied with anything that he wrote, but he has searched his mind and his conscience and he believes that under the circumstances they are the very best that he can do. Anyway, they can stand in their present order until—after lunch.

A sign of his youth was the fact that to the day of his death he had denied himself the luxury and slothfulness of habits. I have never seen him smoke automatically as most men do. He had too much respect for his own powers of enjoyment and for the sensibilities, perhaps, of the best Havana tobacco. At a time of his own deliberate choosing, often after many hours of hankering and renunciation, he smoked his cigar. He smoked it with delight, with a sense of being rewarded, and he used all the smoke there was in it.

He dearly loved the best food, the best champagne, and the best Scotch whiskey. But these things were friends to him, and not enemies. He had toward food and drink the Continental attitude; namely, that quality is far more important than quantity; and he got his exhilaration from the fact that he was drinking champagne and not from the champagne. Perhaps I shall do well to say that on questions of right and wrong he had a will of iron. All his life he moved resolutely in whichever direction his conscience pointed; and, although that ever present and never obtrusive conscience of his made mistakes of judgment now and then, as must all consciences, I think it can never once have tricked him into any action that was impure or unclean. Some critics maintain that the heroes and heroines of his books are impossibly pure and innocent young people. R. H. D. never called upon his characters for any trait of virtue, or renunciation, or self-mastery of which his own life could not furnish examples.

Fortunately, he did not have for his friends the same conscience that he had for himself. His great gift of eyesight and observation failed him in his judgments upon his friends. If only you loved him, you could get your biggest failures of conduct somewhat more than forgiven, without any trouble at all. And of your molehill virtues he made splendid mountains. He only interfered with you when he was afraid that you were going to hurt some one else whom he also loved. Once I had a telegram from him which urged me for heaven's sake not to forget that the next day was my wife's birthday. Whether I had forgotten it or not is my own private affair. And when I declared that I had read a story which I liked very, very much and was going to write to the author to tell him so, he always kept at me till the letter was written.

Have I said that he had no habits? Every day, when he was away from her, he wrote a letter to his mother, and no swift scrawl at that, for, no matter how crowded and eventful the day, he wrote her the best letter that he could write. That was the only habit he had. He was a slave to it.

Once I saw R. H. D. greet his old mother after an absence. They threw their arms about each other and rocked to and fro for a long time. And it hadn't been a long absence at that. No ocean had been between them; her heart had not been in her mouth with the thought that he was under fire, or about to become a victim of jungle fever. He had only been away upon a little expedition, a mere matter of digging for buried treasure. We had found the treasure, part of it a chipmunk's skull and a broken arrowhead, and R. H. D. had been absent from his mother for nearly two hours and a half.

I set about this article with the knowledge that I must fail to give more than a few hints of what he was like. There isn't much more space at my command, and there were so many sides to him that to touch upon them all would fill a volume. There were the patriotism and the Americanism, as much a part of him as the marrow of his bones, and from which sprang all those brilliant headlong letters to the newspapers: those trenchant assaults upon evil-doers in public office, those quixotic efforts to redress wrongs, and those simple and dexterous exposures of this and that, from an absolutely unexpected point of view. He was a quickener of the public conscience. That people are beginning

to think tolerantly of preparedness, that a nation which at one time looked yellow as a dandelion is beginning to turn Red, White, and Blue is owing in some measure to him.

R. H. D. thought that war was unspeakably terrible. He thought that peace at the price which our country has been forced to pay for it was infinitely worse. And he was one of those who have gradually taught this country to see the matter in the same way.

I must come to a close now, and I have hardly scratched the surface of my subject. And that is a failure which I feel keenly but which was inevitable. As R. H. D. himself used to say of those deplorable "personal interviews" which appear in the newspapers, and in which the important person interviewed is made by the cub reporter to say things which he never said, or thought, or dreamed of—"You can't expect a fifteen-dollar-a-week brain to describe a thousand-dollar-a-week brain."

There is, however, one question which I should attempt to answer. No two men are alike. In what one salient thing did R. H. D. differ from other men—differ in his personal character and in the character of his work? And that question I can answer off-hand, without taking thought, and be sure that I am right.

An analysis of his works, a study of that book which the Recording Angel keeps will show one dominant characteristic to which even his brilliancy, his clarity of style, his excellent mechanism as a writer are subordinate; and to which, as a man, even his sense of duty, his powers of affection, of forgiveness, of loving-kindness are subordinate, too; and that characteristic is cleanliness. The biggest force for cleanliness that was in the world has gone out of the world—gone to that Happy Hunting Ground where "Nobody hunts us and there is nothing to hunt."

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