
William D. Robinson

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The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armor against fate:
Death lays his icy hand on kings:
Sceptre and crown
Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.¹

On Friday, November 7th, 1800, in the town of Washington, Daviess County, Indiana, William D. Robinson departed this life, in the 65th year of his age.

The announcement of the death of William D. Robinson, outside of a limited number of personal friends, created no stir in the little town of Washington, situated on the O&M Railroad,² and yet, when William D. Robinson breathed his last, a really great life went out, and a great soul winged its flight to meet its creator.

William D. Robinson was born May 22nd, 1820, and was therefore at the date of his death, 64 years 5 months, and 15 days old.

For several years past, Mr. Robinson had been in declining health. His disease, baffled the skill of physicians, and the patient, always hopeful, sought to arrest its progress. His courage never deserted him. He realized that the disease, whatever it was, steadily impaired his physical powers. He saw the inevitable. The pale horse with its skeleton rider was ever on his track, following him through every lane and avenue of his pilgrimage. Death knew, that in William D. Robinson, he had a shining mark but withheld his shafts that his victim might linger, and in his home and on his bed, might watch his declining

¹ First stanza of "Death the Leveler," by **James Shirley** (1596-1666).

² The Ohio & Mississippi Railroad was a regional railway of the second half of the 19th Century which operated between Cincinnati and East St. Louis, Illinois.

sun, see it touch the horizon's verge, provided, at its setting, no clouds obscured the view.

Fortunately, the splendid intellect of William D. Robinson remained unclouded to the last. His sun went down in tranquil beauty.

Mellow light bathed the scene in supernal glory. He had lived and wrought a great work for his fellowmen. He had loved the poor. He had championed the oppressed, he had laid the foundations of a great brotherhood deep and strong and enduring. He had guided its destiny when in its swaddling clothes, had grasped it in his manly arms when its step was faltering and unsteady. He had watched its youth and young manhood with unfaltering trust and solicitude. He had seen it grow in strength and influence until it grasped a continent and boasted of a membership of 28,000 locomotive engineers; and turning his gaze on his dying pillow, while his pulse grew faint and few, and the death chills were creeping up to his heart, he saw the fire burning in Lodge No. 1; then following the march of the order with his eyes fast glazing in death, he saw the blazing light of 452 lodge fires shining on all the elevations, and in all the valleys of the continent, from Nova Scotia to the golden shores of the Pacific; from the orange clime of the South, to where the Arctic blasts mark the boundaries of civilization.

Who shall tell of the entrancing visions of the dying first Grand Chief of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers?

It does not matter who was in the room when death was doing its work. It does not matter who stood around and beside his dying couch — a dying man is always alone with death. It is a supreme hour. The mind, when left unobscured, in an instant grasps and groups every incident from youth onward to old age.

We surmise, that the dying ex-Chief lived over again the years which were devoted to the great brotherhood he founded. They were years of toil, years of doubts and fears, years of battles, of defeats and of victories — years which required courage as lofty as was ever displayed on any battlefield from Marathon to Appomattox — and we surmise that these years, as they passed in review, like an electric flash, enabled the dying chief to say, "I have fought a good fight for locomotive engineers, my brothers of the footboard."

Was William D. Robinson, founder and father of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, rich in this world's goods? Oh, no. He was a poor man. He did not

...Crook the pregnant hinges of the knee,
Where thrift may follow fawning.³

He was one of the noble souls who preferred poverty to perfidy. His soul was as far above deceit and hypocrisy as the stars are above the earth. His tongue was for the utterance of kind words and generous words for men who were struggling to better their condition.

William D. Robinson was honestly poor. He knew what it was to suffer, and the world knows, that however severe the ordeal he preserved the dignity of silence. When he was Grand Chief of the Brotherhood of Engineers, the order could not pay him a princely salary.

When William D. Robinson was told, by Indianapolis physicians, that his disease was cancer of the stomach and would prove fatal in a brief time, he simply replied. "It behooves me then, to put my house in order." There was no tremor, no trepidation, no mental discomposure, he was not surprised. He accepted the inevitable with knightly courage, and went home to "put his house in order" — went home to await the final summons — went home to die.

While he was "putting his house in order" a few of nature's noblemen, members of the B of LE, interested themselves in his welfare. They would ask the great and rich Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, founded by William D. Robinson to contribute so much from their plethoric treasury, as would make the last days of their ex-Chief free from all worldly anxiety — that, whatever else might come, destitution, gaunt, and haggard should not enter the humble home where the ex-Grand Chief was holding converse with death, trying to breathe.

These splendid men — these bright particular stars of the B of LE performed their duty. Their reward will be the consciousness of having performed an act, than which there can be nothing that sheds a brighter halo around fraternity.

These engineers did not stand up in the convention, and with relentless hate, play hyena, and while William D. Robinson was dying, assail him with the venom of an asp, and in his last hours, when this world was fading from view, and his eyes were catching the first faint glimpse of the world beyond — when the careworn and battle-scarred brother was passing through the valley and the shadow of death, when his sensitive ears were receiving the last words of affec-

³ From *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (c. 1600), by **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616).

tion from earthly friends, and catching the first notes of melody from beyond the dark river, these engineers, who would smooth the passage of the dying ex-Chief from time to eternity, did not stop to inquire if William D. Robinson, in all of his long and eventful life had never made a mistake. No, no, no, thank God, they were willing to shed benedictions upon the closing days of the ex-Grand Chief, and leave all his errors, many or few, to a just tribunal. Was it so with all? Were there any who would wreck reputation by foul means, while the death-rattle was in the throat of their victim? Were there any who, while blatantly professing to be followers of Christ, would make heaven blush, by sitting in judgment upon a man and brother, who in honest poverty and honest fame, had reached the final station, and was simply waiting to test the redeeming love of the Savior of the world?

We dismiss such reflections. They give prominence to envy and bigotry at the grave. They arraign human nature and firing to the contemplation of men its basest Dualities. They transform men into ghouls. They demonstrate that jealousy, once implanted in the human heart, kills every ennobling quality, and makes its possessor contemptible beyond the power of prudent characterization. If there was *one* in the Pittsburgh Convention, and only *one* who there distinguished himself, then we can wish that *one* no greater punishment while living than the memory of his worse than savage cruelty. To stab a dying man with words sharper and more venomous than a serpent's fang is a hallucination that marks depths of soundless depravity, and such is the verdict of all honorable men.

Let it pass. William D. Robinson is beyond the reach of assassins. In this tribute to his memory, to his life work, to his many noble traits of character, we would broaden the wings of charity so that were the dead man's faults a thousand, or one, we would hide them all, that we might the better read all of his multitude of manly and redeeming virtues.

We have said that William D. Robinson laid the foundations of the great Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. In doing this, he as certainly laid the foundations of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. Nor is this all — he taught all railway employees that they, too, could organize; and, as a consequence, the world beholds the orders of Engineers, Firemen, Conductors, Trainmen,⁴ and Switchmen

⁴ Formerly members of the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen.

marching to conquest under their banners, that float in every breeze that blows over the continent.

Such triumphs belong to the favored few, and they challenge the admiration of all thoughtful men.

William D. Robinson possessed a mind of more than usual grasp. As if by intuition, he saw the strong and the weak points of a proposition. This splendid faculty was many times and often demonstrated in the early history of the brotherhood he so successfully established. A pathfinder, he saw the way when others hesitated. He went forward when others advocated retracing their steps, or choosing some other line of march. Obstacles which to others seemed insurmountable, he removed or skillfully avoided, and went forward. Tenacity of purpose was one of his distinguishing characteristics. He did not discard counsel, but having investigated before deciding, he was not to be deflected from his purpose by men who formed hasty conclusions, and were therefore easily persuaded. It was this quality of his mind that enabled him to lead the brotherhood he had founded to ever-increasing success. It gave him self-reliance without egotism, self-control without pride or ostentation. It enabled him to exhibit a self-sacrificing spirit for the good of others, without boasting of his deeds or achievements. William D. Robinson was not spectacular; he sought no glorification. He was a born leader; he hewed out pathways to high elevations; disappointments intensified his courage and increased his resources, and thus he led on his brotherhood until all the membership caught the inspiration of his matchless energy; and when the order was advancing, by conquering strides, to power and influence, he quietly laid down the gavel and resumed his place on the footboard.

If the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers is great and powerful, influential, and rich, it is because in its youth it was fortunate in having such a man for its leader, for its organizer, for its first Grand Chief, as William D. Robinson, whose declining years were years of ill health; whose physical powers could no longer respond to the demand of keeping the wolf of impecuniosity from his door; no longer respond to the aspirations of an intellect that had made it possible for others to reap where he had sown, and live in luxury by virtue of his unrequited labors.

William D. Robinson, the first Grand Chief of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, was a student of books as well as of men and machinery. He was familiar with the thoughts of great men —

the world's best minds. He loved strong intellectual food, and assimilated it — took it into his mental organism. His public speeches abound with expressions worthy of the brightest men of the age. When he spoke, he said something; nor did he repeat himself on every occasion.

William D. Robinson was splendidly equipped mentally for the position he occupied. He loved English classics, whether of prose or poetry, and often beguiled a weary hour by dallying with the muses. He could listen in rapt delight to the lullaby melodies of an Aeolian harp; or stand, awe-impressed, amidst the sounding symphonies of Niagara. What of such mental endowments? This: William D. Robinson had a heart that could be touched when humanity pleaded for sympathy, and a soul that could respond with Spartan courage when the oppressed demanded a champion of their cause. Gentle as a woman, in peace; but in war he entered the list and fought with lion-hearted courage where the battle was thickest. He lived

Unaw'd by power and unappall'd by fear ⁵

and when death laid its grasp upon his vital currents and froze them in their flow, he could but yield, but this he did

* * * Not, like the quarry slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust.

He approached his grave

Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams. ⁶

We confess to great admiration of William D. Robinson. He was no ordinary man. To speak well of the dead is an old time injunction, but in this case, there is in the duty a sad and mournful pleasure. It is a case in which comparative youth pays willing homage to old age, crowned with white hairs, to a life crowned with deeds destined to live in the hearts of railroad men as long as organization has a friend, as long as noble deeds can find a tongue to voice an eulogy.

⁵ Line from "Prologue," by **Oliver Goldsmith** (1728-1774).

⁶ From "Thanatopsis" (1811), by **William Cullen Bryant** (1794-1878).

We know the silver cord is loosened, and the golden bowl is broken at the fountain, still we do not weep. Tears are not in order. Our friend, the past Grand Chief of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers has endured his last pang. In fancy we behold him at rest. Neither summer's heat nor winter's cold shall disturb his repose. Poverty has wrung from him the last despairing sigh. Friends will cherish his memory and his virtues will live in perennial beauty. As for enemies — well, God pity them, if such there are to be found.

In this hour when locomotive engineers and firemen stand uncovered at the tomb of William D. Robinson, the question arises, What can be done to perpetuate the name, the fame, the memory of a man who gave the best years of his life for their benefit? Is not the answer, we will build him a monument worthy of his deeds, of his labors and sacrifices? We will believe that such is the response.

If it is, let the good work begin, and let it be carried forward until a granite or a marble shaft shall mark the spot where his dust reposes.

What hallows ground where heroes sleep?
'Tis not the sculptured piles you heap!
In dews that heavens far distant weep
 Their turf may bloom,
Or genii twine beneath the deep
 Their coral tomb:

* * *

What's hallow'd ground? 'Tis what gives birth
To sacred thoughts in souls of worth! —
Peace! Independence! Truth! go forth
 Earth's compass round;
And your high priesthood shall make earth
 *All hallow'd ground.*⁷

The poet's idea is correct. Where William D. Robinson sleeps his last sleep, is hallowed ground, and monumental marble could add nothing to its sacredness. But it is all of that without reference to the living. What can the living do to bear testimony that the last resting place of William D. Robinson is hallowed ground?

⁷ From "Hallowed Ground," by **Thomas Campbell** (1777-1844).

We do not believe the name of William D. Robinson is soon to perish and be forgotten. We believe the brotherhood he founded will be his imperishable monument, and that his name in connection with that great order is to increase in luster as the years flow on. But that does not cancel the debt of gratitude the two great brotherhoods of the locomotive owe his memory, which if not met, will, in the judgment of mankind, cover the living with obloquy.

We believe the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen will respond in a way that will bear eloquent testimony of their appreciation of the life work of the man that made their organization fruitful above measure of blessings to locomotive firemen. Alone and unaided, our order, for the small sum of 25 cents each, could do the work. But we prefer doing it in conjunction with the Brotherhood of Engineers; nor would we confine subscriptions to the two orders, but would invite all the brotherhoods engaged in the train service of railroads to join in the great work of gratitude.

And now our duty is performed. We have written, with our heart in our hand, of a friend we shall see no more. But we shall cherish his virtues and deeds while memory holds sway, and

... Death, grim death
Will fold me in his leaden arms, and press
Me close to his cold, clayey breast⁸

ere we cease to cherish the memory of William D. Robinson, the grand old man who wrought with self-abnegation for his fellow-man.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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⁸ From *The Mourning Bride: A Tragedy in Five Acts* (1697), by **William Congreve** (1670-1729).