

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86) The original is very badly faded.

Budget
Kemper Editor
Nov 28th, 1885

Obituary: Benjamin F. Brennan

When a man is dead it is mean to trifle with his helpless body: how much more so when his heart is still and his lips are closed, is it to treat lightly of his character.

The well-worn phrase, "say nothing but good of the dead" had its origin in the better side of human nature, in that charity which throws its forgiving mantle over all evil, in that awe which the mystery of death inspires. It is a good proverb but it is not always just, and sometimes it does not apply. Truth is above all things and if the dead are to be discussed, the truth should be spoken in love. A man's biographer ought to be his friend, one who can give and fears not to give an honest statement but who is certain to give the facts in a fair and friendly spirit.

Few men in all their lives have more than one friend who is near enough in sympathy and in confidential relations to fit him to write a biography. Many great and useful men have had no such intimate friend, and for that reason their history remains unwritten.

It is reckless presumption for any one who never enjoyed confidential intimacy with another to write about him when his life is done; yet this is what I now attempt, but in so small a way that what I say will be too modest to be noticed, either for good or ill.

Mr. Benjamin F. Brennan, lately President of the Franklin Bank went not long since into the grave somewhat as a richly laden ship founders in mid ocean. He was a man of singular characteristics and so peculiar in temperament that he seemed in our generation and in our business circles to be the only one of his kind. It was his ambition in early life to be a soldier, and he obtained an appointment to the Academy at West Point, but was prevented from becoming a cadet by partial deafness which attacked him early in life, and increased as he grew older. He then entered a mercantile

career and after some years of successful merchandising, became President of a private bank. It was here only then I knew him and here I observed how unlike he was to any other man holding a similar position of trust in this city. His manner was positive and his conversation crisp. With a clear perception of the duties of this position; a strong conviction of a banker's responsibilities, stern, almost dogmatic opinions on the principles of finance, he possessed most excellent judgment and keen insight into the motives and qualities of men.

In the daily performance of his duties, he was controlled more by certain general principles than by petty questions or the issues of any separate case. These principles were the creation of his own philosophizing, but were grounded upon a substratum of what may justly be called a sense of religious obligation to God and his fellow man. His distinguishing feature as a banker was that he valued money for what it can do, and not for its own sake. Money was his servant to do his bidding. He never was, as most men who handle money are, its slave.

In this great democracy we are beginning to have the meanest of all aristocracies, the aristocracy of money. The race for money, the praise of the multitude goes up to the man who has it or controls it with very little consideration as to how it was obtained. This adulation tends to develop in rich men a self complacency and exaltation which without the adulation some of them at least would escape. But it is now so common for the many-headed Vulgars to worship in a low sense the man of wealth that he generally cannot help being affected by. It is the air he breathes. He is reminded by his fellow men every day that he differs from them, that he is more fortunate than they, and he, in his secret thoughts grows away from them and more and more, consciously or otherwise, he wraps himself around with a garment of selfishness. He begins to love that which wins for him the consideration of others, and that love is the root of all evil.

For this reason I never yet have known a very rich man who would not, in my opinion have been a better and more agreeable man and he possessed merely a reasonable competence.

Now I do not know whether Mr. Brennan could be called rich or not. I know that he handled a great deal of money, and upon him it had no such effect as that I have indicated. It was his slave, and had to do his will, and that will was regulated by the loftiest considerations of duty and righteousness.

He was compelled, of course to advise in petty matters, and sometimes to assist in petty deals, but they were not his doing nor his suggestion. He was a man first and a banker afterwards and he lived his daily life in the very heart of the crowd which daily bends its knees to Mammon and which, with here and there a feeble exception, worships no other God; without himself being an idolater or soiling his hands or his heart with the filthy lucre.

Next to the soundness of mind and body, the greatest earthly blessing is money provided it be accompanied with the true idea of its use and proper function. This idea Mr. Brannan possessed, and upon it he regulated his business life, and to it he was always consistent and faithful unto death.

There is a story in an ancient record of how that three young men were condemned to be cremated without first being killed. The furnace was heated seven times more than it was wont to be heated. In fact, it was so cruelly hot that it cooked the men who came forward to throw in the victims. Yet the young men, although they fell down found into the midst of the burning fiery furnace came out thence safe and well; upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was a hair of their heads singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire has passed over them.

I regard this story as a vivid and vigorous allegory. The crime with which they were charged, and of which they were confessedly guilty was their refusal to bow down to and worship a certain golden image. And the moral of the story is that it is better to go into the fiery furnace regardless of consequences than yield in matters of principle and conscience. It seems to us about as hard a trial of one's integrity to principle as could be conceived; this being cast bound, into a seething oven and a deliverance from the melting heat something far beyond the possible. Yet it seems to me that to be condemned to pass a number of years as a banker on Third Street, to calculate interest to a cent, and for a day, to charge one tenth of 1% and to pay 1/20 of 1% to shove and discount, and to exercise generally the power of the master over the servants for it is truly said that the borrower is the servant of the lender.

All this and not to worship the golden image is a severer trial than the roaring flame, and to escape the idolatry is a more wonderful deliverance than that of the young princes of Israel. The gold of which the image was cast was good and useful but it became only a contemptible thing when it

was put into a form to which the imperial soul of man was expected to render homage and adoration. And yet, if that adoration be universally and continuously yielded, even the senseless metal itself begins to assume the airs of a divinity. How then in the center of such adulation can a mortal man maintain his simplicity? – his true manhood? He can do it only by being gifted originally with a degree of manhood which will carry him into and through the fiery furnace without breaking or bending his constancy or his will.

I know nothing of Mr. Brannan's domestic life. I saw little of him outside of the Franklin Bank; there I knew him only in business relations. I do not pretend to be fit to write his life and I speak only of that one distinguishing feature of this character which I had occasion to observe: his ability to control money and monied interests and to remain free from its gangrene and canker.

When Mr. Selves kept the famous St. Charles on Third St. to which all of the world of high-livers resorted to worship their bellies, he himself seldom ever broke bread in the place.

Thrice daily he went uptown to take a simple meal with his family. So Mr. Brannan in the Bank was a Banker and a just and righteous one; away from thence you could not tell whether he would a borrower or a lender be.

As Shakespeare says:

“I have no ambition to see a goodlier man.”

The Editor.