LINES TO A TRUSTEE

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THE CITY REGARDS the country with an ironic smile as if to say, "Go ahead. Prepare your strong young men. Let them draw from you the breath of great deeds. Care for them tenderly. Rear them through their young strategic days. But keep this in mind. In the end they will come to me. They will boast of you, speak fulsomely of the days they spent with you, but they will come to me." And, in the main, the city speaks the truth. To it they come, perhaps too many of them. The city lays its snares and calls its wares, and the young men forsake their native hills and dales and henceforth crowd the city's offices and courts and market places. And the cities joust with each other for strong young men, each preening itself constantly to attract their attention and affection.

It was ever so. When the nineteenth century was born Nashville must have been extraordinarily alluring to strong young men. It is not quite easy to understand the power of its beckoning to them; but the power existed. The New England Puritan, the Virginia Presbyterian, the cavalier of Carolina, young men from Kentucky with faces aglow with the light of the pioneer, stalwart men from other sections, all came to Nashville and compounded their strength with the strength already there; and the word went abroad that Nashville was a city of great strength.

There was strength on both sides of Wilkins Tannehill's ancestry. His father and his mother's father were Revolutionary officers. He was born in the outskirts of Pittsburgh, March 4, 1787. Presently the family moved into Pittsburgh and there the boy attended preparatory school and later the College of Pittsburgh.

It happened that three uncles on the Wilkins side owned the Saline Salt Works in Southern Illinois. To a clerkship in that industry young Wilkins Tannehill was sent, likely in 1799. His tenure there was brief. Salt wells of greater strength were developed in northeastern Kentucky, and over the line in the Kanawha Valley. The Wilkins transferred most of their interest to the new territory, and Wilkins Tannehill went with the transfer, being located in the offices at Lexington. He was probably the sales manager of the salt company. It is known that he made trips to Memphis, Natchez, and New Orleans to establish distributing depots. The salt business flourished, and in 1810 he asked to be sent as representative to Nashville. "The City of Rocks" as he so caressingly referred to it in later times must have been most inviting then to an alert young man, aged twenty-three. He took with him a bride who had been Eliza DeWees of Lexington. It was her grandfather who had furnished Washington's headquarters at Valley Forge. She matched the distinguished blood that ran in Tannehill's veins, and for thirty-three years was his devoted and intelligent wife and counselor. To them were born seven children, and the fourth and fifth generations of Tannehill influence, wielded by the Bryans, the Bayless', the Berrys, the Gleaveses, the Pilchers, the Dorris', the Averys, is potent in Nashville today. A great-great-grandson, Coburn DeWees Berry, is carrying on in the finest family tradition in the Peabody Demonstration School.

In Nashville he opened a warehouse for the sale of salt from the Wilkins' vats. It was a prosperous business. There was great demand for salt, and Wilkins Tannehill offered to Nashville the best salt then available. The young man rapidly became a part of the town's commercial and social life. Nashville was made a distributing center for the salt works. The salt was shipped by river to Nashville and distributed to the outlying sections.

Also Nashville was made the center for the purchase and storage of saltpeter, made in the limestone caves of Kentucky and Tennessee. The saltpeter works in Mammoth Cave was the largest unit of the Wilkins system. The product was furnished by contract to the Federal Government for the manufacture of gunpowder for use in the War of 1812.

In 1813 Wilkins Tannehill was elected to membership on the aldermanic board. He had then been in Nashville but three years. On his own account he opened a grocery store in Nashville and a branch in Pulaski. He was in quick succession chosen cashier and president of the Bank of Nashville. There was some unfortunate legislation affecting the bank, and it passed out, leaving Tannehill insolvent. He had invested his entire resources in it. That marked his exit from the commercial life of Nashville and his formal entrance into the city's intellectual activities. As a matter of fact, he served as mayor for a term of two years, beginning late in 1825; but, in the main, his activities were literary and fraternal thenceforward. He had been a commercial leader. He became now a spiritual leader, of which leadership some mention shall be made in detail.

He had ever been a fluent writer; and as time effected its refinements, his style developed an Addisonian purity. To a certain extent his passion for writing disqualified him for commercial pursuits. In time he became the section's outstanding Mason. He was the first Worshipful Master of Cumberland Lodge. He was Grand Master in Tennessee from 1817 to 1824, except in 1822 and 1823 when Andrew Jackson served. He twice held that distinction in Kentucky. When LaFayette visited Nashville in 1825 he was so warmly and fittingly received that he ever delighted to mention his deep gratitude. The speeches of welcome are preserved. Wilkins Tannehill welcomed him in behalf of the Masonic Order. In passing, it may be recorded that there lives today in Nashville a lady two of whose great-grandfathers welcomed LaFayette, Robert D. Currey as mayor and Wilkins Tannehill as Masonic head. He did much to purify the fraternity's ritual which by reason of the promixity of Louisiana had become mixed with the French rites. He made visits to Philadelphia, New York, and Boston to study the true content of the Ancient York Rite. He wrote in 1824 *Tannehill's Masonic Manual* which for a half century was the textbook of the Masons of this section. He directed the organization of a Masonic college at LaGrange, Kentucky, in 1845, and one at Clarksville, Tennessee, three years later. On July 4, 1845, he presided "in due and ancient form" at the laying of the corner stone of Tennessee's capitol.

His editorial work began in 1818 when he became an active editorial writer for *The Whig*. In 1830 he started *The Herald*, a paper of pronounced Whig tendencies, which presently performed yeoman service in exploiting Henry Clay, "the rising star of the West." But his heart was never quite in his politics. There was a perfunctoriness in

his partisanship; but eagerly he sought in literature to discover man's deeper yearnings. The currents of political thought might run for a day or a year or a decade; but great literature was a well springing up through the generations. In 1827 he published *The History of Literature from the Earlier Period to the Revival of Letters in the Fifteenth Century.* It indicates a profound comprehension of the literary impulses of the classic period. The book was one of the first published in Nashville. The printer was John S. Simpson. The printing, measured by current practices, was most crudely done. For instance, the forms were inked with chamois skins; and yet the printing would do credit to the best equipped establishments of the present. In 1847 he published *The History of Roman Literature.*

In 1832 he was prevailed upon to move *The Herald* to Louisville. The promoters of Henry Clay sponsored the move, conceiving it a strategic maneuver. But it did not so prove. The paper led a precarious existence until 1840 and then died painlessly. In 1841 he returned to Nashville and there he lived with his books and his friends. He had by then gathered a great library, stated in contemporary records to be the largest west of the Alleghanies. October 1, 1845, he emerged from his retirement among his books and assumed the editorship of *The Orthopolitan.* The title was undoubtedly his. It explicitly bears his mark. Let others christen papers with such inanites as *The Herald, The Gazette, The News;* but for Wilkins Tannehill, names bearing the flavor of Old Greece or of Rome at its literary flood. *The Orthopolitan* in style was as chaste as Addison. Perhaps it was intended to be a political organ, but it never was. The essay was more at home in its columns than advocacy of a political measure, the essay studded with polished Latin phrases. The spirit of *The Orthopolitan* was detached, apart from petty moves upon a political chessboard, for which loftiness of thought *The Orthopolitan* was so penalized by a prejudice-fed public that it died of inanition when it was twelve months old. In June, 1847, he commenced publishing *The Portfolio,* in part a journal of Free Masonry, in part a journal of literature. This publication continued for an even three years. Almost since infancy Wilkins Tannehill had been an omnivorous reader. So eager was his reading that his vision began to pay the penalty, and his sight had begun to fail while he yet lived in Louisville. He was able to stay the progress of the disease a while; but his wife died in 1843, and the bereavement shocked him so cruelly that the trouble took fresh hold. His valedictory in the issue of June, 1850, is of great pathos:

> . . . My sight has become so much impaired that I am compelled to discontinue the publication. I have but faint hopes of the restoration of my sight; but I have been taught to bow with submission to the will of God Who orders all things for the best. . . . I avail myself of this opportunity to deliver a few parting words. It is perhaps the last I shall ever have of addressing you through the press.

Gradually the darkness closed in upon him, and on October 4, 1855, he took leave of his Masonic brethren. When the business of the meeting was finished he quietly asked for a leave of absence. He knew and so did the others that this was his exit from the order that he loved so well. He stood in that quiet dignified grace which ever had marked him, and before him in long procession the brethren passed. Each whispered his name, clasped his hand, passed in line out of the door, and he was left alone. From that day to the end, June 2, 1858, the Grand Lodge of Tennessee was but a golden memory.

But Wilkins Tannehill was bigger than salt, bigger than groceries, bigger than political partisanship, bigger than a fraternal order, bigger than a mere student of literature. He was catholic in his sympathies and sensitivities. He was always alert to the city's more important gestures and needs.

When Philip Lindsley arrived in Nashville late in 1824, Wilkins Tannehill was one of the group who met him. His connection with Cumberland College at that time was only informal; but he was entirely conscious of the desirability of restoring the institution to operation.

At the first opportunity Dr. Philip Lindsley had Tannehill appointed to his board. That opportunity came December 3, 1825. It seems that the obligations of the trustees were seriously regarded. For one thing, eligibility was withdrawn from one who failed to attend two successive meetings without acceptable excuse. Nicholas Perkins committed that fault and was quietly but firmly dropped, and Wilkins Tannehill elected in his stead. He never during his membership missed a meeting. He was elected secretary May 21, 1826, and thereafter his quaint signature ended the record of all meetings. He resigned June 30, 1832, that being the time of his removal to Louisville. His colleagues memorialized his departure with an eloquent tribute to his "indefatigable passion for learning." His successor as secretary was Thomas Washington whose signature bears an extraordinary resemblance to the historic autograph of his great kinsman, George Washington. There is reason to believe that Tannehill's commitment to education suffered no lapse by reason of his shift of scene. The ancestor of the Kentucky Education Association met in Lexington, November 6, 1833. Wilkins Tannehill of Louisville was elected secretary. He had been in Kentucky less than a year. He was, except Philip Lindsley, perhaps the first in Nashville to urge the establishment of a school for the training of teachers. He published in *The Orthopolitan,* November, 1845, a lengthy and convincing editorial setting forth the needs for and virtues of such an institution. That was but six years after Cyrus Peirce took charge at Lexington. Other pleas for such a school flowed from his pen from time to time. He was a member of the original group which organized the Tennessee Historical Association. He was consciously concerned with every phase of Nashville's welfare. To illustrate this, in 1848 he carried on a campaign which resulted in the revamping of the city's street lighting system. He was active in the promotion of the improvement of the navigability of the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. He played a major role in the organization of the Temperance Societies which were then springing into life. He had the prophet's prescience of the emergence of human affairs. He foresaw clearly the War between the States and the consequent passing of an old order, feudal and glamorous. He saw beyond that reign of heartbreak to a Nashville, a Tennessee, tried and purified by fire but rising strong and glorious from the wreckage. Events yet unborn cast their shadows clearly before him, and often when he wrote the spirit of prophecy was upon him.

Toward the end of his life he went to live at the home of his son-in-law, W. T. Berry, one of Nashville's pioneer printers and the most renowned bookseller the city ever had. One can, without much stretch of fancy, find Tannehill's influence in Berry's conduct of his business. In his stock were not only books of current popularity, but rare books of appeal only to connoisseurs and the literati. His store was a haven for those throughout the South whose libraries were in process of accumulation. Some of the

older, riper libraries of Nashville are stocked with books, bearing the Berry imprimatur. A praiseworthy feature of the store was a well-stocked reading room offering great comfort to body and mind and available to all at no cost whatever. This, according to one writer, was "a most commendable offset to the patronage of the bar rooms."

In the Berry home Wilkins Tannehill lived his last years. It was a pleasant home, and there were many friends whose presence brightened the darkness. And there were memories! Memories with which to recreate titanic days and deeds. He died June 2, 1858. The funeral was preached at the First Presbyterian Church. One report claims that "more different individuals attended the services at the church and the cemetery than comprise the city's total population." At the cemetery the Masons performed their noblest gesture of sorrow and honor as all that was mortal of a good and helpful man was lowered into the grave beside that of his beloved wife.

But time moves on its ancient ruthless way. Landmarks dearly beloved in their day remain only in musty records. Names greatly honored by contemporary men fade out. Gravestones carrying names once illustrious lay fallen across sunken graves. Few go to Wilkins Tannehill's grave now. The roar of nearby factory and train lifts the tocsin of a careless and forgetful generation, "Memories pay no dividends." But those words are terribly false. Those who remember and revere great men and their labors find a spiritual vitality and richness that utterly transcend grosser values. Today has few riches that were not bequeathed by a million yesterdays.