



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

The Crisis, Vol. 6, No. 2

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PLÁCIDO
Poet and Martyr
By JOSÉ CLARANA

[[image - drawing]]
[[caption]] PLÁCIDO (From a drawing in possession of Mr. Arturo Schomburg.) [[/caption]]

GABRIEL DE LA CONCEPCION VALDES, whose surname comes from the hospital in which he spent the earliest days of his un-happy life, was born in Havana in March, 1809. The son of a Spanish dancer and a barber, a free man of color, he was yet too dark to escape the blight of Africa's descent. His mother's temperament and occupation did not permit of her giving much attention to the child of her waywardness, and Plácido, as he later called himself, was cared for by his father's mother and given such schooling as was available to persons of color. The early death, in Mexico, of his father was the first severe blow to the checkered career of this man of sorrows, and the boy was compelled to begin the struggle of life as apprentice to a carpenter, then to a printer. He soon abandoned this occupation to acquire and practice with creditable skill the trade of a combmaker, reading the while every book that touched his hand. But his heart was never in this work, for at the age of 11 years he had felt the call of the genius which made him locally known of Cuban poets.

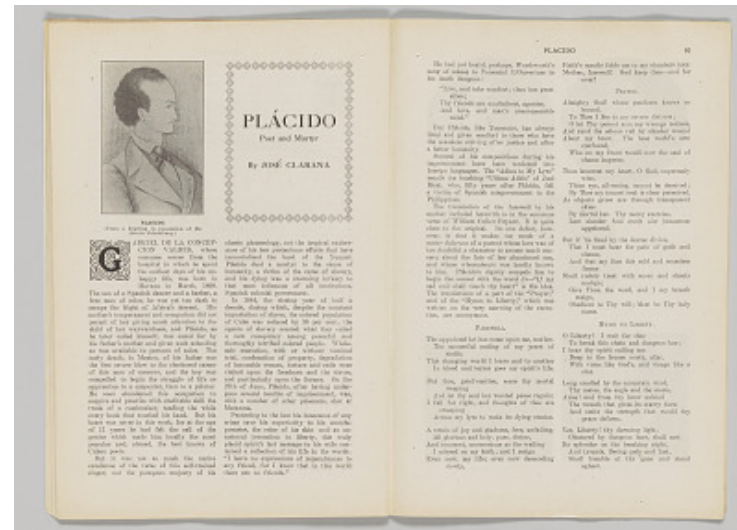
But it was not so much the native excellence of the verse of this self-trained singer, not the pompous majesty of his classic phraseology, not the tropical exuberance of his less pretentious efforts that have immortalized the bard of the Yumuri. Plácido died a martyr to the cause of humanity, a victim of the curse of slavery, and his dying was a crowning infamy to that most infamous of all institutions, Spanish colonial government.

In 1844, the closing year of half a decade, during which, despite the constant importation of slaves, the colored population of Cuba was reduced by 30 per cent., the agents of slavery created what they called a new conspiracy among peaceful and thoroughly terrified colored people. Whole-sale execution, with or without nominal trial, confiscation of property, degradation of honorable women, torture and exile were visited upon the freedmen and the slaves, and particularly upon the former. On the 27th of June, Plácido, after having under-gone several months of imprisonment, was, with a number of other prisoners, shot at Matanzas.

Protesting to the last his innocence of any crime save his superiority to his contemporaries, the color of his skin and an occasional invocation to liberty, this truly placid spirit's last message to his wife contained a reflection of his life in the words: "I leave no expressions of remembrance to any friend, for I know that in this world there are no friends."

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He had not heard, perhaps, Wordsworth's song of solace to Toussaint L'Ouverture in his death dungeon:



"Live, and take comfort; thou has great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind."

But Plácido, like Toussaint, has always lived and given comfort to those who have the ceaseless striving after justice and after a better humanity.

Several of his compositions during his imprisonment have been rendered into foreign languages. The "Adieu to My Lyre" recalls the touching "Ultimo Adis" of José Rizal, who, fifty years after Plácido, fell a victim of Spanish misgovernment in the Philippines.

The translation of the farewell to his mother included herewith is in the sonorous verse of William Cullen Bryant. It is quite close to the original. Its one defect, however, is that it makes too much of a mater dolorosa of a parent whose love was of too doubtful a character to arouse much concern about the fate of her abandoned son, and whose whereabouts was hardly known to him. Plácido's dignity compels him to being the sonnet with the word Si - "If my sad end shall touch thy heart" is the idea. The translations of a part of the "Prayer," and of the "Hymn to Liberty," which was written on the very morning of the execution, are anonymous.

FAREWELL.

The appointed lot has come upon me, mother,
The mournful ending of my years of strife;
The changing world I leave and to another
In blood and terror goes my spirit's life.

But thou, grief-smitten, cease thy mortal weeping
And let thy soul her wanted peace regain;
I fall for right, and thoughts of thee are sweeping
Across my lyre to wake its dying strains.

A strain of joy and gladness, free, unfailing,
All glorious and holy, pure, divine,
And innocent, unconscious as the wailing
I uttered on my birth; and I resign
Even now, my life; even now descending slowly,
Faith's mantle folds me to my slumbers holy.
Mother, farewell! God keep thee - and forever!

PRAYER.

Almighty God! whose goodness knows no bound,
To Thee I flee in my severe distress;
O let Thy potent arm my wrongs redress,
And rend the odious veil by slander wound
About my brow. The base world's arm confound,
Who on my front would now the seal of shame impress.

Thou knowest my heart, O God, supremely wise,
Thine eye, all-seeing, cannot be deceived;
By Thee my inmost soul is clear perceived,

As objects gross are through transparent skies
By mortal ken. Thy mercy exercise,
Lest slander foul exult o'er innocence aggrieved.

But if 'tis fixed by the decree divine,
That I must bear the pain of guilt and shame,
And that my foes this cold and senseless frame
Shall rudely treat with scorn and shouts malign;
Give Thou the word, and I my breath resign,
Obedient to Thy will; blest be Thy holy name.

HYMN TO LIBERTY.

O Liberty! I wait for thee
To break this chain and dungeon bar;
I hear thy spirit calling me
Deep in the frozen north, afar,
With voice like God's, and visage like a star.

Long cradles by the mountain wind,
Thy mates, the eagle and the storm,
Arise! and from thy brow unbind
The wreath that gives its starry form
And smite the strength that would thy grace deform.

Yes, Liberty! thy dawning light,
Obscured by dungeon bars, shall cease
Its splendor on the breaking night,
And tyrants, fleeing pale and fast,
Shall tremble at thy gaze and stand aghast.

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