

JUSTICE RAMON DIOKNO

To die in harness is the dream of many a successful man, as he looks back on a life devoted to useful activity, checkered with fortunes and misfortunes, enriched by adversity as well as prosperity. The harder a man has worked, the more difficult it is for him to stop working, as long as his physical and mental faculties will permit him. To such men, life is synonymous with activity; to be alive is to struggle; to stop working, to rest or retire, is to die a slow death.

Such a man was Ramon Diokno, lawyer, jurist, legislator, political leader. Born in an age that produced Quezon, Osmeña and Palma, coming from the province that gave us Laurel and Recto, Justice Diokno was indeed a product of his times. He came upon a troubled world, for the Spanish regime had just ended and the American experiment was beginning. There were innumerable opportunities for bright young men who could quickly bridge the gap between the Spanish and English language, between colonialism and democracy, between old world courtliness and new world initiative and brashness. Ramon Diokno was such a young man.

It was the era of nationalism. The talk of independence for the nation just liberated from Spanish rule filled the air. The martyrdom of Rizal, the exile of Mabini, the sacrifice of Bonifacio and Luna were newspaper headlines rather than pages of history, and the immediacy of their impact on the national character was visible and audible. The smoke of battle was still in the horizon, and the sound of marching feet were often heard in the night.

Ramon Diokno was swept into this current. First he was the young lawyer, then the young politician, then the young leader. He became secretary of the Philippine Assembly, a strategic position from which to keep in touch with the leaders of the nation, as well as with the Americans who were still laying out the nation's course.

He saw Osmeña rise to power, then Quezon. He noted the defeat and oblivion of a group of Filipinos who wanted permanent political ties with the United States, and he saw the mounting crescendo of his countrymen's demand for complete, absolute and immediate independence. He observed how political patronage was dispensed, and how political dog fights were conducted. When he could no longer resist the call, he entered the fray and was elected member of the Lower House.

But his fame and prestige as a corporation lawyer overshadowed for a time his political activities and he was appointed government corporate counsel. Here he was in his element, the fringe areas where government and business met, the enterprises and projects where government became big business and big business often determined political doctrines. He amassed such a wealth of information and experience about the operation and inner machinery of government corporations that his advice was often sought by both administration and opposition alike.

The call of politics became irresistible again, and in 1946 he ran for, and was elected, Senator. But he felt that his health was waning, and after his term ended he did not seek reelection. Nevertheless, his country called him again, to another field, the Supreme Court. At an age, therefore, when other men would think of a life of retirement, of writing memoirs or of supervising a farm, Ramon Diokno accepted an appointment to the Supreme Court. He lived out the long twilight of his life, as he had lived the dawn, fighting for his principles, stubborn as only one can be whose conscience has been his guide, unafraid of unpopularity or political pleasure. In a precedent-setting decision, he voted against a group of vocal, well-organized young men and women who saw in him the chief obstacle to their admission to the Philippine Bar. It was his valedictory, and it is fitting that the younger generation should now address Justice Diokno:

Soldier, rest! thy warfare o'er,
Dream of fighting fields no more;
Sleep the sleep that knows not breaking,
Morn of toil, nor night of waking.

