

SOME PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF A QUARTET OF THE BALTIMORE BAR.

By J. UPSHUR DENNIS.

When I came to the Baltimore Bar in 1868, John Nelson had recently died; Thomas S. Alexander had left Baltimore for New York, to assume there easily and at once that position among the very foremost of the leaders which he had so long occupied here; and John V. L. McMahan—the “Mighty McMahan”—had been for some years retired, owing to increasing physical infirmities.

But they left behind them a quartet who took and filled the place in the profession they had formerly shared together,—if not strictly speaking altogether contemporaries in point of age, yet so constantly engaged with them in their forensic contests that they may be considered contemporaries in fact,—men who gave added lustre to the Maryland Bar, and in every way kept its honored standard still “full high advanced.” I allude to Reverdy Johnson, William Schley, I. Nevitt Steele and S. Teackle Wallis; and it is my purpose to give some personal recollections of these gentlemen, which I have been enabled to gather owing to opportunities of association, as to two of them at least, beyond what would have ordinarily been the privilege of one of my years and humble standing in the profession, due to favorable circumstances of which I was not slow to avail myself. I shall speak of them in the order in which I have named them.

No account of Mr. Johnson would be at all complete for those who never saw him, without some description of

his personal appearance and manner. He was of medium height, round-bodied, solidly almost sturdily built, just such a physical mould as indicated perfect health, capacity for work, and endurance, without the risk of a breakdown, of all the toils and strains of the most active life at the trial table. He was cursed with neither nerves nor liver, but was the robust embodiment of *mens sana in corpore sano*. His features were strong; his forehead of great height, fullness and breadth; while the back of his head was shaped like a barrel, and seemed to bulge out all around, as if indicating holding capacity. But the dome of his head was its most striking feature—so lofty, so symmetrically rounded, that it seemed to tower above all others, as the dome of St. Peter's minimizes all other designs. The portrait of him in the Superior Court room is a very excellent likeness—a trifle too stern in expression perhaps; but its pose, the comfortable position which he has assumed in the chair, its air of easy nonchalance, are altogether characteristic.

He was almost totally blind; one eye wholly so. He could not walk the streets or even a room with furniture in it without the guiding assistance of some one, and was not able to recognize features at all; but he always knew you, as soon as you spoke, by your voice. This loss of sight was the result of an accident, and happened in this wise: Early in the thirties, a great match race took place at Washington between a horse owned by General Jackson—then President—and one owned by Judge Gabriel Duvall, of Maryland, then Judge of the Supreme Court of the United States (think of this, ye *laudatores temporis acti*); all Congress was present, even if it had not formally adjourned for the occasion; and two of its members, Mr. Stanley, of North Carolina, and Mr. Wise, of Virginia, (afterwards the well-known Governor), who were marshals of the course, became engaged in a fracas on the ground—with the result that a challenge to a duel

posed. While the preliminaries were being arranged Mr. Wise retired to Virginia, and Mr. Stanley to Baltimore. Mr. Johnson was Mr. Stanley's second, and while the correspondence was going on, one morning they were practicing at making line-shots. Mr. Johnson aimed at a small hickory sapling, and hit it; but with the small quantity of powder carried by the old-fashioned duelling pistol, and the toughness and resiliency of the hickory assisting, the ball failed to penetrate and rebounded, striking Mr. Johnson full in the eye and completely destroying its sight; and in course of time the other failed, through sympathetic action. This was the only tragedy that occurred, the duel being happily arranged; and I regret to say that it happened on a Sunday morning, in which some of our over-pious friends may at once proceed to recognize the ear-marks of a judgment.

Distinguished as was his career as a Senator and as Attorney-General of the United States; distinguished too, as were his services as Minister to England, not only in his handling the difficult diplomatic questions which arose during his administration, but in his success in first awakening that feeling of *entente cordiale* between the two countries which, taken up and carried still further forward by wise and judicious successors, has secured that grand diplomatic triumph—greater, broader and more far-reaching than all others—by which the two great English-speaking nations have been brought to recognize, in kindred blood and a common tongue, ties which should bind them together with a common purpose, as long as the world presents questions which, in the interests of civilization and justice, the Anglo-Saxon race is best fitted to solve; distinguished as Mr. Johnson was in all these directions, yet his highest fame will always rest, with the general public, upon his achievements as a constitutional lawyer. Yet, great constitutional lawyer as he was—universally recognized as one

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