

REVERDY JOHNSON, LL. D.

REVERDY JOHNSON, eldest son of John Johnson, the first Chancellor of that name, was born on the 21st of May 1796, in the City of Annapolis, within a stone's throw of the spot where he met his lamentable end. Almost his entire education was received at St. John's, having entered the Grammar School when very young, but it is doubtful whether he ever took his degree. The time at which he would have completed the ordinary course of collegiate study, was embraced in the unhappy period in the history of the College, when, by the unlawful withdrawal of its funds, it was reduced in strength and shorn of academic honor. No commencement trophies illumined the darkness of those melancholy days. Not a few of our Alumni, since eminent, left her halls during the interval without the customary tokens of her regard.

Mr. Johnson is said to have withdrawn from College at sixteen—it is quite certain that he began the study of the law at an unusually early age, under the direction at first of his distinguished Father, and afterwards, for a time at least, in the office of Judge John Stephen, of the Court of Appeals.

I have heard from contemporary authority that he early became familiar with the atmosphere of the Court, and during the whole progress of his

preparation for the Bar attended the trial of causes with remarkable regularity:—thus imparting to the theory of the science a reality and practicalness in application, which afterwards gave him that clear perception and ready mastery of the principles of the law which excited the admiration alike of the Bench and the Bar. His passion for it was hereditary, and was manifested by a devotion which was prophetic of success.

He was admitted to the Bar and began practice at Upper Marlboro, Prince George County, in 1815, when only in his twentieth year. Not long after he was appointed by the Attorney General of the State, his deputy for that Judicial District, and performed the duties of the office with energy and credit.

In November 1817 he sought a wider field for the exercise of his talents, and removing to Baltimore, entered upon the brilliant career which has made him one of the most eminent lawyers of his country. His rise in his profession was rapid and steady, with no backward step, until the topmost round of the ladder was reached.

It was not till 1821 that we see his name for the first time, connected with public duties other than those of his profession. In that year, when only twenty-five, he was elected to the State Senate for a term of five years, and at its expiration was re-elected for another term. Of the latter, however, he served only two years, and resigned the office to devote himself more exclusively to his practice.

In 1845, he was elected to the Senate of the United States, where he at once assumed a leading

position, and took a prominent part in the discussion of the important questions which then engaged the attention of Congress and the country. This position he resigned in 1849 to accept the appointment of Attorney General in the Cabinet of General Taylor. Perhaps no official position could have been more congenial to his habits and tastes, but he held it for little more than a year, retiring, with most of the Cabinet, on the death of General Taylor and the accession of Mr. Fillmore.

He now devoted himself to his practice almost exclusively, until the outbreak of the unhappy civil war which convulsed the land. His earnest efforts were exerted to avert that calamity. He was one of the delegates from Maryland to the "Peace Convention" which met at Washington to make a last attempt to compromise our sectional difficulties.

In that convention he boldly repudiated the doctrine of secession, and avowed himself an unconditional Union man. When therefore all measures for that purpose failed and the strife became inevitable, Mr. Johnson, as is well known, defended the use of the military power of the General Government for the maintenance or restoration of the federal Union. While continuing to sustain this position, he strove by every means in his power to allay the bitterness of local feeling, and watched for the first opportunity for conciliation and for terminating the horrors of fraternal strife.

In 1861 he accepted a seat in the House of Delegates from Baltimore County;—and in the winter of 1862–63, he was again elected to the United States Senate;—resuming his seat in that body in

March 1863, after an interval of fourteen years. About this time he was deputed by President Lincoln as a special commissioner to visit the City of New Orleans and revise the decisions of its military commandant (General Butler) in regard to some important questions involving our relations with other Governments. He found it necessary to reverse those decisions, in which his course received the approval of the Government. While in the Senate he voted for the constitutional amendment abolishing slavery—having, in common with his great predecessor Wm. Pinkney, and other of the older statesmen of Maryland, deplored the existence of that institution. He participated largely in the debates of the period, and evinced that perfect independence in the formation of his opinions upon public measures and in the advocacy of them, which was so marked a trait in his character. Always decided in his views, as a public man he often found himself in conflict of opinion with leading men of the party with which he acted. The liberality of his mind and his habit of bringing every subject to the test of calm reasoning and cool judgment, would have always prevented him from becoming a bigoted partisan.

We come now to an important event in the public life of Mr. Johnson. This was his appointment as Ambassador to England, with special reference to the differences with that country, particularly those growing out of what were known as the "Alabama Claims." He was now to appear in a new character, that of a diplomatist.

Coming as a minister of peace and with a reputation of the highest distinction for ability, upright-

ness and candor, he was met by a reception, both from government and people, never before accorded to an American minister. So general and so marked was this sentiment, that Lord Clarendon declared, in a letter to a friend in America, that "Mr. Johnson was the only diplomatic representative which had ever brought out the true friendly feeling of the British people for those of the United States." There was about Mr. Johnson a personal magnetism which drew and charmed the English mind, and his blended geniality and dignity of manner was calculated to confirm his influence. Entering upon negotiations with a mutual feeling like this, it is not surprising that in the course of a few months a treaty was framed that embraced the main points in dispute.

As is well known, however, the Senate refused to ratify it. It does not befit the occasion to consider the reasons assigned for its rejection. There was at the time a condition of popular and party feeling unfavorable for calm judgment, and quite sufficient to account for the senatorial action, without disparaging either the merits of the treaty, or the skill and ability of the negotiator.

There are not a few unprejudiced men who think that the subsequent treaty (which was ratified) did not differ very essentially from the former, as to the value of the principles established or the material advantages gained.

Mr. Johnson returned home in June 1869, and resuming practice in the higher branches of his profession, continued it, with unabated ardor, down to the very day of his lamented death.

On the morning of that day the 10th of February 1876, he had come to Annapolis to argue, at the opening of the Court of Appeals the next morning, the first case upon the docket. Dining, with other distinguished guests at the Executive mansion, his life was terminated suddenly, in the evening of that day, by the melancholy accident, the incidents of which are too well known to need repetition here.

Apart from a natural shock at its character and violence, there would seem to be a happy fitness in *the place and the occasion of his death.* Full of years and full of honors, he had returned to his native city to engage in another forensic contest in the same old Statehouse which had been one of the principal theatres of his fame, scarcely a hundred feet distant from the spot where he fell. Still nearer, on the right, stands the ancient mansion where his life began and his youth was nurtured, and a few hundred yards distant in another direction, rise the classic halls of his Alma Mater, where *his education was received and he put on the intellectual armor which was to fit him for professional attainment.*

At the height of his fame, in the full possession of his faculties, with the devoted love of many kindred, the affection of numerous friends, and the universal esteem of his countrymen, he passed out of life, without the pangs of sickness or the infirmities of decay,—by a painless death.

In the calm retrospect of such a life, the associations of its close seem in fitting harmony with its history—the quiet sunset of an almost cloudless day.

Mr. Johnson's earthly life was an eminently successful one, and to outward observation a happy one.

Of calm and placid temperament, his disposition was not easily ruffled by the troubles of the world. Resolute in will, patient of results and of unusual self-control, he seemed to possess the faculty of overcoming difficulties, and of shaping events to a happy issue. High-minded and honorable in all his dealings, he never stooped to an unfairness. With the instincts of the perfect gentleman, his professional bearing was uniformly courteous and respectful. Amiable and kind-hearted, he was gentle and considerate towards all men. In all the relations of life he was exemplary. His heart was the home of pure and noble impulses, and he passed through life without a stain upon his reputation.

Mr. Johnson always manifested a high sense of the obligations of religion, and was a regular and reverential attendant upon its services. It was natural, therefore, and necessary to the completion of such a character, that in his later days, he should yield obedience to the requirements of the Church by a hearty reception of its ordinances.

To my mind there is no more touching incident in his history, than that which witnessed the approach of the great lawyer and statesman, leaning on the arm of his son, to the chancel-rail of St. Paul's, and kneeling there with bowed head to receive from the Bishop "the laying on of hands" in the holy rite of Confirmation.

That was the consummation, the crowning glory of his life; and from the spirit of humility and the testimony of faith which inspired and accompanied it, may his friends derive sure hope and consolation in his departure.

NOTE.

Mr. Johnson's death was caused by a fall, the precise circumstances of which are unknown. Dining at the Executive Mansion, he left the table before the other guests and was conducted by the Governor to the parlour for a short repose, as was his custom after dinner. About a half hour afterwards he was found lying on the pavement near the side of the house, bleeding and lifeless. It would seem that he had gone out alone in the dusk of the evening, and misled by his imperfect vision, had strayed from the path and fallen down an area connected with the building, striking his head against a projection of the basement wall.

Mr. Johnson had for several years been gradually losing his sight, making it unsafe for him to walk out alone, and occasioning his friends no little anxiety by his venturesomeness. For a long time he had been unable to read a line, and was wholly dependent upon others for the examination of authorities in the preparation of his arguments. But his increasing blindness was borne with uncomplaining submissiveness, his cheerfulness of spirit seemed never to leave him, and his conversation was full of characteristic pleasantry and humour to the last.

There is another subject of which mention should be made. Mr. Johnson took a deep interest in the welfare of his Alma Mater, which was shown in various ways. For several years past he rarely omitted attending the exercises of Commencement, and his presence and speeches made the most attractive feature of the Alumni banquet. Those who were present will not soon forget the occasion, upon which he alluded in touching terms to a visit, while in England, to St. John's College, Oxford; and how, as he wandered through its ancient Halls, his thoughts reverted to his boyhood days and to his own Alma Mater so far away, until he gave utterance to his feelings and told them of his indebtedness for intellectual culture to another St. John's College in his native land.

MEMOIRS

OF

DECEASED ALUMNI

OF

ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, ANNAPOLIS,

BY

JOHN G. PROUD AND JOHN S. WIRT,
HISTORIOGRAPHERS.

COMMENCEMENT DAY, 1878

BALTIMORE:
1879.