

ISAAC NEVETT STEELE.

AMONG those who achieve distinction, entitling them to be placed among the representative men of the community in which they live, there are many whose quiet perseverance in a particular pursuit, while it excites little notice from the mass of the public as the years pass by, results in elevating them to positions where they attract an attention that was rarely bestowed at any one period of their earlier career. The eminence thus attained is generally as lasting as it is deserved. It rests upon sure foundations. If it owes little to mere genius, whose exhibitions are often as evanescent as they are brilliant, the reputation of such men is due to their clearness of perception, their sound judgment, their unflagging industry in their single calling, and combined therewith to their moral qualities, which make them the objects personally of esteem and regard. To this class belongs the subject of the present memoir, who realizes in the place he holds at the Maryland bar the best results of the qualities referred to; but whose life, except when ill health compelled him to seek rest and recreation abroad, has been passed almost wholly in the performance of professional duties, with too little of the merely sensational in its events to afford to his biographer much material for extended comment.

Isaac Nevett Steele was born in Cambridge, Dorchester county, Maryland, on the 25th of April, 1809. His father, James Steele, a prominent citizen and large landholder, married Miss Mary Nevett, of the same county. Of their ten children, Isaac Nevett was the ninth. From the time of his marriage until 1819, Mr. James Steele resided in Cambridge, engrossed in the management of his extensive property, taking little part in public affairs, but leading the life of a genial, liberal and hospitable Maryland country gentleman. The family mansion on the Choptank river, and known far and wide as "The Point," is still standing. In 1819, Mr. Steele left Dorchester county, and removed with his family to Annapolis, where Mrs.

Steele had been educated, and where he resided until his death, which happened not long afterwards.*

The private tutor in Mr. Steele's family, at Cambridge, was the Reverend Nathaniel Wheaton,† and under his care the education of I. Nevett Steele was commenced. In due course, he went to the public academy in Cambridge, and from thence to the preparatory school of St. John's College, at Annapolis, where he remained until he was sixteen, when he entered the *Sophomore class at Trinity College*, at Hartford, Connecticut. Ill health here prevented his receiving a degree, and although offered an honorable position in the graduating class, he was unable to return to Hartford to take the part that had been assigned to him in the exercises of the Commencement. That his standing while in college was highly appreciated, may be inferred from the fact that he was chosen, some years later, to deliver the annual oration before the Alumni.

While in his eighteenth year, Mr. Steele entered the law office of Alexander C. Magruder, in Annapolis, as a student, and coming afterwards to Baltimore, completed his studies for the bar under the care of *David Hoffman*, then law professor in the University of Maryland. In 1830, he was admitted to practice. The earlier experience of Mr. Steele had little to distinguish it from that of many others. Business came to him gradually; but in 1839, he had so far distinguished himself as to attract the attention of the then Attorney General, Mr. Josiah Baily, who appointed him his deputy for Baltimore County Court—an appointment continued by Mr. Baily's successor, the late George R. Richardson, and retained by Mr. Steele until he resigned it in 1849.

The same ill health that had prevented Mr. Steele from taking part in the annual ceremonies of Commencement day at Trinity College, returned in 1845, when he found himself obliged to seek, in foreign travel, rest and recreation from the labors of his office and the general practice that had by that time engaged him. Accordingly, he visited Europe, and remained abroad eighteen months, traveling in England and on the continent. On his return to Maryland, he at once resumed the practice of the law in Baltimore, and in 1849, married Rosa L., the daughter of the late

* Mrs. Steele's father was drowned accidentally in crossing the Chesapeake bay to attend the General Court, which held its sessions at Annapolis, as a juror, and the widow marrying Dr. Murray, of that city, Miss Nevett resided and was educated there.

† Mr. Wheaton was a clergyman of the Protestant Episcopal Church, who afterward became quite prominent, and was for a time President of Trinity (then Washington) College, at Hartford, Connecticut.

John Nelson, a leader of the Maryland bar, and well known throughout the Union not only as Attorney General of the United States, but as an able statesman and prominent politician. With the drawback of ill health still interfering with the continuity of professional life, Mr. Steele was induced to accept in the latter part of 1849, at the hands of General Taylor, the place of Charge d'Affaires to Venezuela, in the hope, fully realized by the result, that the mild and equable climate of the latitude would enable him, at last, to persevere without interruption in the labors of professional life. At Caraccas, Mr. Steele remained for four years, narrowly escaping death in a struggle with robbers, who broke into the house occupied by the legation, in the expectation of finding in the dwelling of the Charge d'Affaires, the specie which it was customary for parties to deposit for safe keeping with diplomatic representatives of their respective nationalities. While in Venezuela, Mr. Steele gained considerable credit from having succeeded in procuring the settlement of heavy claims on the part of citizens of the United States, which had been so long postponed as to be regarded next to hopeless. Returning to the United States in 1853, Mr. Steele, with health strengthened and confirmed, at once resumed his practice, and from that time to the present has been assiduously and devotedly attending to it, confining himself to no one court, but having engagements in all branches of his profession in the heaviest cases, occurring as well in the inferior tribunals as in the Court of Appeals, at Annapolis, and in the Supreme Court at Washington.

Mr. Steele would not have been an American lawyer, without at one time or another, having had something, however little, to do with politics, and accordingly, we find him, at one period in his career, Chairman of the Whig State Central Committee, and on other occasions advocating in public addresses, the principles of the party to which he was attached. These, however, were but occasional occupations, and since his career began, have never interrupted the steady and even pursuit of the profession to whose highest stations he was gradually but assuredly advancing. But it must not be supposed that he reached distinction, *per saltum*, as is sometimes the case with those who achieve the highest position in the profession; on the contrary, he was contented to pass the earlier years of his life in that pleasant, social dissipation, which runs away often with time which might be more profitably bestowed. In the few years which immediately succeeded his admission to the bar, he was far more the man of society than the student of Fearne and Coke. This did not, however, last long, and when he turned from

the seductive pleasures of the drawing-room it was with an energy and power which soon drew attention to him as one who was marked for eminence.

The first occasion which drew public attention strongly to him was in the prosecution of Adam Horn, in 1843, for one of the most atrocious murders to be found in the annals of crime. Horn was an industrious German, a tailor by trade, who had come to this country in the pursuit of fortune, and by industry and frugality, had provided for his wants and made some money besides. After working for several years in Baltimore, he went to Virginia, where he bought a farm and married. Becoming dissatisfied, he sold his farm and removed with his family to Ohio, where he again purchased land and settled himself. Here his children died, and a deep hatred having sprung up between himself and his wife, he murdered her by striking her with the pole of an axe, but that failing to kill her at once, he sought to cut her throat with a penknife, and failing in that, he completed it with the sharp edge of the axe. For this crime he was arrested, committed to prison, escaped and came again to Baltimore county, where he again married a young girl of eighteen, he being fifty-one. Becoming jealous of her, he murdered her with a billet of wood, and then to conceal his crime, he severed her head from her body and burnt it in the hearth till it was entirely consumed, and put her body into a bag and buried it in his orchard. For this crime he was arrested and convicted. Mr. Steele, then quite a young man, conducting the prosecution alone against the ablest talent of the bar. The trial lasted seven days, the whole evidence being circumstantial, and the total consumption of the head of the murdered victim rendering the proof of the *corpus delicti* difficult and doubtful. The prosecution was conducted with admitted perfect fairness, against three gentlemen defending, two of them of great experience in the profession and great weight of personal character; the third being a young gentleman, making his first efforts in the profession; but notwithstanding these odds, the perfect logical analysis of the testimony, presented in Mr. Steele's argument, was so convincing that after a retirement of ten minutes only the jury brought in a verdict of guilty. A few days after his conviction, Horn made a confession of his guilt, corroborating, in a very remarkable degree, the theories upon which Mr. Steele had claimed his conviction.

Another trial for murder, in 1849, brought to Mr. Steele great reputation for his forensic ability. This was the trial of Conrad Zintner, a young German, for the murder of Mrs. Elizabeth Cooper,

the crime having been committed at midday, on the high road, and for no other motive than to rob her of the trifle of money upon her person. The defence was *moral insanity*, and was pressed with all the vigor able and experienced counsel command. In this trial, also, Mr. Steele again stood alone, and combated with successful result the ingenious theories of his learned opponents. From this time Mr. Steele's success in his profession was assured, and with the interval we have already mentioned, he has since been constantly engaged in important causes at law, in equity, in admiralty, in patent cases, in the State Courts, and in the United States Courts, occupying his whole time in the most arduous study. Among the causes in which the profession recognize his distinguished ability, may be mentioned the "tax cases," reported in 12 Gill & Johnson, which involved a multitude of important questions in reference to the State's power to impose the taxes deemed necessary to sustain its honor and credit. These cases were argued and decided in the Court of Appeals, of Maryland, but two of them were taken on appeal to the Supreme Court of the United States, and Mr. Steele was appointed, in association with John Nelson, by a resolution of the Legislature, to argue them.

The case of *McClellan vs. Graves*, reported in 19 Md., was also a case in which the advocacy of Mr. Steele had a large share in establishing, as the law of this State, that a municipal corporation could not, by contract or otherwise, strip itself of its legislative powers conferred upon it for the public good. This question arose as to the right of the city of Baltimore to repeal the ordinance for opening Holliday street, after it had in part executed certain contracts entered into under its provisions, and the determination of it was as above mentioned.

It may not be amiss to say a word upon the leading characteristics of Mr. Steele's mind, and his professional habits. In respect to the latter, he may be said to be a pains-taking, laborious and industrious student. These qualities are limited and restrained only by a condition of health not the strongest, but these are the weapons upon which he relies. He trusts nothing to genius which he knows can be accomplished by study and research, but when he uses these more reliable weapons of forensic warfare, they are used with a logical vigor which is itself genius. Of course, with his varied practice and constant occupation, he is frequently called to the trial table with little or no opportunity for preparation, but then the full storehouse of his experience stands him in good stead for the onset, and the case will not have progressed far before he

will be abreast with the foremost. In style, Mr. Steele is entirely unpretending, his aim seeming to be directed to the matter and not to the manner of his utterance, though he is always easy and fluent. He does not attempt studied flights of oratory, but he never lacks the earnest vehemence of an aroused spirit when injustice is to be exposed or vice rebuked, and then, with the earnestness of the conviction, which pervades his own bosom, he stirs to their depths the hearts of his hearers. In his statement of a case, he is remarkable for his clearness, and in his argument of it, for his forcible conciseness. The effect which he produces upon his hearers is conviction, and the admiration he excites is that which is extorted by logical power in argument. Whether successful or not, all who listen to him are satisfied that he has omitted nothing that research could discover or thought elaborate to gain his cause. At the trial table he is cautious and wary, leaving nothing to chance and taking nothing for granted, and when he is done, little is left for any one else to do. In his intercourse with his colleagues he is frank and communicative, and in his personal relations with his brethren of the bar, his equal temper and courtesy of manner, merits and receives their highest regard. In person, Mr. Steele is above the medium height, with strongly marked features, of a spare frame and apparently nervous temperament. For some years past he has been a member of the Protestant Episcopal Church.