

THE
UNION SEMINARY MAGAZINE

NO. 2—NOV.-DEC., 1892.

I. LITERARY.

MAJOR JAMES MORTON*

Was a native of Prince Edward County, Virginia, where he spent the greater part of his very long life. He died at the age of ninety-two, at High Hill in Cumberland County, the family seat of his son, Dr. William S. Morton. He was one of a family of eighteen children—twelve sons and six daughters.

*The following sketch of Major James Morton, of Willington, was written by my Father during his later years, while he lived with me in Jonesborough, N. C. (I being at that time pastor of Buffalo and Euphonia churches in Moore county, N. C.), about 1880, and published in the *Central Presbyterian* in two or three numbers. I had so often when a student in the Seminary heard "Aunt Rice" (Mrs. Anne S. Rice, widow of Rev. Dr. John Holt Rice) and Mrs. Wharey with whom I boarded (a lady of singular simplicity and sincerity of character and of pure and lovely piety) speak of their Father, Major Morton. And when during those last sweet and precious years of my Father's life, he spoke of the old hero, of Dr. Rice, of John Randolph of Roanoke, of William B. Giles, of Dr. Alexander, and his Father Rev. Drury Lacy (him of the "silver fist and silver voice"), of Dr. Moses Hoge, of Benjamin F. Stanton, and the evangelist Rev. Asabel Nettleton, and others, I begged him that he would commit some of these reminiscences to paper. This is the only one that he prepared, and I have copied it carefully from his manuscript, spelling and all. So many who read it in the *Central* more than ten years ago have asked me to furnish it again to the press, where it might appear in some form more likely to be preserved, that I send it to the UNION SEMINARY MAGAZINE. Major Morton's connection with the Hill, and with Rev. Dr. Rice, the founder of the Seminary, and his deep personal interest in the Seminary and daily prayer for it, make it eminently appropriate.

W. S. L.

At an early age he enlisted as a private in a military company raised by his father, Captain John Morton, at the beginning of the Revolutionary war, in which company his father had eight of his twelve sons, four being too young for service. Although he entered the army as a private, he came out a Major, and if any man ever deserved such promotion he did. He was a man of indomitable courage and energy as his entire service of eight years in the army abundantly proved—enduring hardships and privations, hunger, nakedness and cold, the very recital of which often made my young blood bound with enthusiasm or sent the cold chills through my whole frame with a shudder.

Many acts of signal gallantry I could record—one only must serve as a specimen. In some desperate engagement in New Jersey, as a Lieutenant with a company of some sixty men, he was ordered to hold a bridge at every risque, to prevent a British regiment from crossing it, turning the flank and getting into the rear of our little army. He did keep it under a fire so hot and murderous that all his men but eighteen were either killed or wounded! But he succeeded in burning one end of the bridge under this fire, and thus saved our little army from destruction.

In this connection the following anecdote, as showing his *gratitude* for a kindness rendered, is worthy of record.

After crossing the Delaware that bitter cold night, and the silent march till morning over the frozen earth, and the sudden surprize and capture of six hundred Hessians, the little army was necessarily very hungry and greatly fatigued—for they had eaten nothing since the morning of the preceding day—the unexpected order to move preventing them from eating their evening meal. About eleven or twelve o'clock, after the battle, and after the prisoners had been secured, Major Morton was detailed with a small band, and was sent off, in this state of hunger and exhaustion, as a foraging party to gather up what provisions they could for the suffering men and horses. The country around Trenton had been thoroughly ravaged by the British while they held it, and their expedition was well-nigh fruitless. In order to get what they could the little band was divided and went in every direction for supplies, and in going from house to house, he entered alone the very humble cottage of a poor woman, the young mother of two small children who had lost her husband in some former

battle. He told her his errand, but when he found she could not furnish anything for the army, he made known his own famishing condition and begged her, at least, to give him something to eat. She went to a small keg and raising a little piece of pickled pork out of it, told him, it was all the food she had in the world, but he was welcome to a slice of it, and that she would broil it for him. He could not wait for that, but ate it *raw as it was*, without any bread, and I have often heard him say—"It was the sweetest morsel he ever swallowed."

Long after the war was over and he was settled on a small farm, he ascertained by letters of inquiry that she was still living with her children and was as poor as ever. From the first crop he ever made and sold, he sent her \$20.00 and repeated the gift for several successive years. She had saved his life by sharing with him all she had, and he, in return for her great kindness, did what he could to render her condition comfortable. There was a *man* and one of the noblest.

About this time—during the campaign in New Jersey—he got the nick-name of "*Solid Column*," and kept it all his life; whether from his acts of martial prowess, or from his personal appearance, for he was even then a stout, thick-set man, which might have suggested it, or more likely still from his undaunted courage, his unblenching integrity of character, and his stern and faithful performance of duty, I do not know, but every body knew him as "*Old Solid Column*." When the Marquis de la Fayette visited this country in 1823-4, as the "Nation's Guest," and came to Richmond with his *suite*, all the surviving officers of the Virginia Line that could do so went to meet him there. Amidst the crowd, and after an absence of more than thirty years, it is said that the Marquis rarely failed to recognize any officer who came up to shake hands and make his respects. When Major Morton approached him, and whilst yet at some little distance: "There" cried La Fayette—"there comes '*Old Solid Column*,' as brave a man as ever lived," and sprang forward to meet him and kissed him on both cheeks several times, as he did to some others whom he knew on sight.

He was taken prisoner at some disastrous battle in South Carolina, and confined with a large number of other prisoners—I forget how many—in Charleston. During his stay there the prisoners were chiefly fed on rice. I have taken dinner with him a hundred times in his later life, and whenever asked to

take rice, his eyes would fill with tears, and he would promptly decline it, saying: "I got rice enough in Charleston."

Whilst there, two remarkable incidents occurred:—the one relating to his wonderful *far-sightedness*, in which he surpassed any human being I ever knew or heard of—many proofs of it when he was a very old man I have witnessed. For instance, I have known him to distinguish gentlemen riding at the distance of a mile. I have known him to tell a dog chasing a hare a half-mile off, and see the hare and know the dog, when no one else could see the hare at all. But the particular case to which I allude occurred in this wise: Sitting one day at Charleston, in full view of the ocean, he saw a small fleet heading for the city in the face of a stiff breeze. A British officer passing him, he tipped his cap and told him a number of ships were making up to port. The officer looked eagerly in the direction to which he pointed, but could see nothing, and cursing him, passed on. Major Morton knew nothing of the expected arrival of re-inforcements and supplies, but the officer did—hence his eagerness. In a half-hour or so this officer returned, and as he was passing by, Major Morton said to him: "Now, Captain, you can see the ships—there are six of them—they have just tacked and the sun is shining on the top galleys—now, now, you *can* see them." The officer now gazed with intense interest, but seeing his captive was sure of what he told him, went rapidly to his quarters and brought a hand-telescope, accompanied by other officers. After looking for a few moments, he exclaimed, "that fellow is right—they are coming! they are coming!" And soon a great crowd of officers and men were looking on with delight. He had with his naked eye seen and counted the number of ships more than a half-hour before any one else could see them with the telescope. The other incident is the way he made his escape, and regained his liberty. It was by plunging into the bay at night and swimming to Fort Moultrie, a distance of eight miles. He seemed to make the very sharks afraid of him. At all events, he was not attacked by one, but arrived safely, though greatly exhausted, and soon rejoined the army.

Often have I sat, when a little boy, and listened for hours together in breathless silence, while he and his comrades-in-arms would talk over and fight over the battles in which they had been engaged. Old Willington, the family-seat of Major Morton, was the scene of many an interesting story, and

Tarleton Woodson, and Willis Cruit, and Jack Trent, and Carter Page, and other Revolutionary officers and soldiers were welcome guests at this hospitable mansion. There they would meet and talk of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, Germantown, The Cowpens, Camden, Guildford Court-House, Eutaw Springs, and especially Yorktown, and these places became as familiar to me as if I had been present at every table.

I said Willington was a place of hospitality, and it is true. Indeed it was the most hospitable mansion I ever knew, if I may except Montrose, in Powhatan County, the seat of my maternal ancestors. I may remark here, that I do not remember ever seeing either house without company when the families were at home, and before they were broken up and dispersed by death or marriage. Like many of the families of old Virginia during those times, they were in danger of being eaten out of house and home by the crowds of visitors entertained. They carried on what was called "junketing" at a great rate, and would stay three or four days or a week, feasting day by day on the biggest sort of dinners. After the lapse of a few weeks the visiting would be reversed—the visited families visiting—and if it could be done, the indulgence in feasting and so forth would be greater still. No families could exceed those at Willington and Montrose, and I will add at Olney—five miles below Richmond—the seat of William Sterling Smith, Esq., in entertainments of this kind. Oh! how we boys loved to see the carriages rolling up! for we were sure of a good time coming. By the way, it may not be amiss to state, that in old times, it was the almost universal custom in Virginia, for people of respectable means to give names to their residences. If they did not "call their lands by their own names," they at least gave them such names as would designate them, so that the family and the house were intimately associated in the minds of those who spoke them. For instance, if a visit was to be made, we did not say we are going to dine at Mr. Berkeley's, but we are going to Oakland; if to *Count* Dillon's, we would say to Sandy Ford, and every one talked that way. And besides the names already mentioned there were Longwood, the seat of Judge Peter Johnston, and Templeton and Dover, the seats respectively of Col. John Nash and Abner Nash, Esq., his brother; and Springfield, that of Col. Samuel Venable, and Hay-Market, that of

William L. Venable, Esq., and Morven, that of Peyton Randolph, Esq., and many others. These estates varied in extent from 600 or 700 acres to 2,000 acres of land, with a corresponding number of slaves. But all these things have passed away.

But I am wandering—thinking of glorious old times, and must return to my subject. Major Morton was a civil magistrate and when he was on the bench, and Captain Nat. Price with him, the people knew they had to behave. The contrast between the good order and decorum of the Court when he was presiding, and the disorder and confusion that existed when he was not there was very marked, everybody noticed it. But as a magistrate, he often adjudicated small cases that were brought before him at home, and like the old English gentry, he held his court in the Hall, the biggest room in the house. One day—I was there—a neighbour brought in a negro man belonging to another neighbour, who had been impudent to him, and wanted the authority of a magistrate to whip him, as the negro's master had refused to let him do it. During the investigation the insulted neighbour flew into a passion and uttered an oath or a curse. The old gentleman stopped short and said: "Mr. Willard, I don't allow such language in my presence, and if you curse again I will fine you for both offences." But in his zeal to convict the negro, Mr. Willard got mad and cursed again, and the old Major "fined him according to law, \$1.00 for each offence." Who, and where, is the magistrate that will do the like in these days?

Major Morton was a Trustee of Hampden-Sidney College and always took a deep interest in the welfare of the Institution. No man was more punctual and regular in his attendance on the meetings of the Board, and though he never made a speech on any subject, he never failed to give a judicious vote. Perhaps the name of no Trustee is signed to more Diplomas issued by the *Senatus Academicus* than his, and always in his bold, honest hand, reminding one of the signature of John Hancock to the Declaration of Independence. The students used to tell a good many anecdotes about him. In my early boyhood there were only two carriages that came to the College-Church—all the rest of the people came on horseback, or in carryalls, or on foot, and the congregations were always large. One of these carriages belonged to Colonel Samuel Venable, of Springfield, and the other to Major Morton. The boys used to say, that the old Major's carriage was so accustomed to come to church that it knew when it was Sunday,

and would roll violently against the carriage-house door until somebody opened it, and if the horses were not hitched up very soon, away it would go off to church without horses or driver! A pretty tough yarn, this.

When I was a boy and a growing lad, the custom was to have a precentor in all the churches. The precentor stood in, or near, the pulpit, and "raised the tunes." He received the hymn-book from the hands of the minister, after he had read the hymn,—then "gave out" two lines at a time, and he and all the people sung them; then two more which were sung, and so on until the hymn was finished. Major Morton was the precentor in the College Church for a great many years, and in "parcelling the lines," as it was called, did it with such inflections and modulations of voice, as to make his reading the two lines almost a *recitative-solo*. As far as I know there never was but that one hymn-book in the church, but ten or twenty people sang to one who sings now, and they made church-musick worth hearing;—musick incomparably better than we hear in our churches now-a-days. But then, every family was a regular singing-school where they all practised musick twice a day at family prayers. Why, it would have been as strange to omit singing at prayers then, as it would be to omit reading the Bible or praying now. I do not know a dozen families where they sing *regularly* at prayers, while ninety-nine hundredths of those that have family prayers never sing at all. And some of the very few that do sing must have a piano badly played to help them out. And so too in the churches:—where the whole congregation, white and black, old and young, used to sing with all the heart and voice, now they must have big organs in the city churches with a *paid organist*, and a choir of eight or ten singers who are frequently quarrelling;—and in the village churches a small choir gathered around a wheezing little instrument to make musick! Thus the people have got to praising God by proxy, and they call that *progress*! I am thankful to say that this miserable proxy-business of choirs and instruments has made no progress in the country-churches of North Carolina, but they sing a good deal as they did in old times, and now and then with some favorite words and tune, make the house ring again.

I wish I could stick to my subject, and not be so often "flying off at a tangent." My subject is Major Morton, who acted as precentor a long, long time, till the infirmitives of age, and

the introduction and general use of hymn-books induced him to give up his office. He loved singing so well, that he usually spent the Sabbath afternoons, lying on his bed, and singing the music-book through. One day at a publick dinner in the Commons Hall, after the cloth was removed, and the wine brought on, and many toasts drunk, Professor McVicar, with some very striking and appropriate remarks, proposed "The health of Major James Morton,—the oldest and most faithful member of the Board of Trustees, and our incomparable precentor: '*Long may he live to sing, and ever live in song,*'" which was drunk with a shout, and "a three times three." The dear old man kept his seat, with a broad smile on his face, and the tears trickling down his cheeks.

In his old age, after his sons and daughters were all married and had gone off, he was left for several years alone, and often became very sad and depressed in spirits. In that great big old-fashioned country house, the seat of unbounded hospitality in former years, he lived;—the only white person on the plantation, except, of course, the overseer and his family, who lived in a small house at a distance. It had been the rule at Willington, and also at most of the houses in the neighborhood, to have family prayers in the morning and evening, as regularly as they got up or went to bed. It was no more omitted than breakfast;—indeed not so much. At these morning and evening prayers, the house servants attended as regularly as the white people, and took part in the exercise of singing at least, if nothing else, for all negroes love singing. After the family was broken up by marriages and removals, these domesticks, by degrees, left off attending prayers, until at last, the old Major was left alone. Still he conducted the service as he had always done, not omitting any part of it. One morning I went over to take breakfast with the old man, and to ask him to come to Ararat to dinner. It was only about a half-mile from my house to his, and when I got on the porch, I heard him reading aloud, and soon found it was the Bible. As I did not wish to disturb him, I sat in a chair by the door, where I could see him and into the room, but with his face turned in another direction he could not see me. There was not a soul in the room but himself,—and there sat the sorrowful-looking old man, reading aloud as if the room was full. Then he took up the hymn-book and "gave out" two lines at a time aloud, and sung them aloud, till he finished the hymn. And then he

kneeled down, and prayed aloud, as he used to do with all his family. I was so touched that I wept like a child, and it was several minutes before I could smoothe my face and go in. I shall remember the chapter and hymn and prayer as long as I live. The chapter was the fourth of Hebrews—the hymn was one he often sung, beginning—

“My drowsy powers, why sleep ye so,
Awake my sluggish soul,”

and the prayer was as simple as that of a child. He prayed for each family and for his children so distinctly that any one knowing the different families would at once know whom he meant. Two of his sons-in-law were ministers, Dr. Rice and Mr. Wharey, and he prayed that a “double portion of the Spirit” might be granted them; and then he prayed that Billy (Dr. William S. Morton) might not be carried away by the world. Then he prayed for his negroes,—that as they could not be free from earthly bondage, they might be Christ’s freedmen;—and then for the Seminary, and lastly for the church, the world over. It was almost as short as my sketch of it—humble, fervent, submissive.

As I remarked at the beginning, Major Morton went to High Hill, Cumberland County, to live with his son, Dr. Morton, where he died at the age of 92 years.

DRURY LACY.

