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ANDREW JOHNSON—MAN OF COURAGE

BY GEORGE FORT MILTON

Even an amateur, adventuring into the labyrinths of tangled fact in quest of truth, must formulate for himself certain measuring-rods for estimating the weights and strengths of the epochal forces which direct the actors, great and small, in the puppet-shows of life and otherwise move the winds of destiny. For there is need of a philosophy of history, home-made though it be, when an era of the past unrolls before you, with its sunlight and its shadow, its tragedy and bitter farce, its sombre list of might-have-beens.

So it has been with my own random researches into the career, the character, and the general scene of Andrew Johnson. These labors have left me well convinced that a chief function of the biographer is to discover and to set forth the impact of a man upon his times, and the influence of the surrounding scene upon the man.

When one considers from this viewpoint much of the "new" history or biography pouring from the press, one wonders a little what may be the compulsion for this fevered stuff. Perhaps it is because ours is an age of confusion and of noise, an age in which a great many people have somewhat breathlessly concluded that the new is always preferable to the old; and in consequence have fathered a "new" history, which at times gives rise to the disquieting suspicion that it is neither new nor history. It may also be suggested that the love of money, the well-known root of all evil, may partly be responsible. But whether or no, at any rate there appear certain hierophants of this art who seek to found a new school of history on a trick of style, and who never scruple the crucifixion of truth for the achievement of an epigram.

The honest practitioner of biography old or new should avoid any such warped perspective. He must realize that it is the important that deserves to be made interesting, rather than the trivial; that the Lincoln who saved the Union has a real significance which the Lincoln who told smutty stories does not deserve. The true biographer will seek verity; and, having found it, he will en-

deavor to transmit it to his fellows through a marriage of scholarship and art.

Froude has quoted a saying of Thomas Carlyle which may still have a certain force. "The history of mankind," that dour old Scot declared, "is a history of its great men; to find out these, clean the dirt from them, and place them on their proper pedestal is the true function of a historian."

Anyone who seeks to apply the Carlyle formula to the study of Andrew Johnson confronts a formidable task. Merely cleaning from him the dirt which has been heaped upon his memory both by contemporaries who hated him and by later writers who neither knew nor understood him, is a man-sized job. For History (as writ by Historians), has not been overly kind to Andrew Johnson. The picture of him which has been fixed in the mind of the common man is one of an uncouth demagogue, a veritable hempen homespun, a man who, by woeful lack of statesmanship, caused an outraged House to invoke the tremendous enginery of impeachment against him, and thus came within a single vote of being thrust forth from the Presidency.

Any such picture is extraordinarily unjust to Andrew Johnson. Let us consider briefly what manner of man he really was.

First of all, he was no backwoods oaf; on the contrary, at least so far as appearance was concerned, he gave far more the sense of being a statesman than did Lincoln. A man of five feet ten inches height, Johnson looked the statesman's part. Major Truman, his secretary and friend, said that he was "matchlessly perfect in figure."¹ Johnson carried himself erect, holding his broad, well-formed shoulders back; it was a carriage of dignity but not of stiffness.

The conventional steel engravings of the tailor-patriot display a rather grim and forbidding countenance, with a brow corrugated with a heavy frown, eyes grim and unrelenting, and a chin thrust forward with great pugnacity. Such portraits were taken at a time when President Johnson was grievously afflicted with "the gravel," so that his life physically as well as politically was a thing of excruciating pain.² There are other portraits which indicate him in a happier mood.

¹Benjamin C. Truman, "Anecdotes of Andrew Johnson," *Century Magazine*, January, 1913, p. 436.

²Frank Cowan, *Andrew Johnson Reminiscences* (Greensburg, Pa., 1894), p. 13.

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His eyes were dark, deep-set and piercing. One contemporary termed them "sparkling and absolutely beautiful." Johnson's forehead, while not exceptionally high, was very wide and perpendicular. He had a large nose, a large and mobile mouth, and a firm square chin; of this last a presidential bodyguard insisted that it jutted out at an obstinate angle, and contained a combative cleft.³

From the days of the tailor-shop in Greeneville, Johnson dressed himself immaculately. During his career of office-holding, he had an almost standardized habiliment of a black broadcloth frock coat and vest, black doeskin trousers and a high silk hat. He was scrupulously clean as to his linen, almost dainty, and in a day and generation when bathing was a weekly custom, he is said to have bathed every day.⁴

There is some question as to the frequency with which he smiled. A White House secretary wrote that his smiles had been very rare.⁵ "On his front," said George W. Jones, who loved him, "deliberation sat, and public care."⁶ But little children remembered Andrew Johnson quite otherwise. One little boy who lunched at the White House with the President's grandson, recalled sixty-five years later the President's "dazzling, tender, beautiful smile." Similarly, a little girl who had attended a children's party at the White House—and Andrew Johnson loved to give children's parties; he it was who inaugurated the Easter egg rollings on the White House lawn—remembered him as a very kindly man. "His face beamed," she told me, "and his eyes smiled with the greatest affection."⁷ While not stately, his appearance was easy and graceful, and when he chose, Andrew Johnson could be delightful. After the trials of the White House, and during the six years of his struggle for vindication in Tennessee, he became more and more charming to his intimates.⁸

In Johnson's demeanor, there certainly was no touch of the

³William H. Crook, Mrs. Margherita S. Gerry, Editor; *Through Five Administrations* (New York, 1910), p. 81.

⁴Truman, *op. cit.*

⁵Cowan, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁶George W. Jones, *Memorial Address* (Greeneville, Tenn., 1878).

⁷Statement of Mrs. Mary DuHamel Clagett, to author, Washington, D. C., December 7, 1928.

⁸Statement of the late Col. E. C. Reeves, to author, Johnson City, Tenn., April 9, 1927. Col. Reeves was for some time a quasi secretary to Andrew Johnson during his post-Presidential struggle for vindication in Tennessee.

blustering demagogue. He was no Ben Butlerish blowhard, but was habitually calm and reserved. And yet there was an uncanny magnetism about him. Lacking most of the arts and graces of the successful politician, and apparently devoid of the ability to flatter, none the less Andrew Johnson gripped the common people to him as with bands of steel.⁹ With his voice, a magnificent physical organ, he could make himself heard almost in a whisper over great throngs, while with a simple, unaffected gesture he could fix the attention or sway the mood of the crowd.¹⁰ Probably Andrew Johnson was the most potent public speaker in America from the death of Daniel Webster to the advent of William Jennings Bryan.

But it was not through oratory that he won the assent of his hearers. During several of his campaigns, notably in his battles for governor against Gustavus A. Henry, and Meredith P. Gentry, in the 'Fifties, and for congressman from the state-at-large against Horace Maynard, the eloquent Radical, in 1871, Johnson's oratory was perhaps inferior to that of his antagonists. But what he said carried conviction. His hearers went home believing that Andrew Johnson had told the truth.¹¹

Aside from politics, his only game seems to have been checkers, which he played indifferently. He looked on all sorts of gambling as being wrong, for it did not represent honest toil. In 1862 he told a friend that he had never gone to a theatre; he would rather study or work. He did like minstrel shows and circuses, but seldom attended, for he "never had much time for frivolity."¹²

The tradition that his devoted wife taught him to read and to write is not exactly true. While he was still an apprentice in Selby's Raleigh tailor shop, Johnson taught himself to read. A philanthropist of the little North Carolina capital, one Dr. Hill, was accustomed to read to the tailors during their noon hour. The book was one of the speakers of the day, variously described as the "American" and the "United States Speaker." One day, Johnson asked Dr. Hill for the loan of the book. The latter said that if the boy could read a sentence from it, he would give it to him. Young Andy picked it up, read a sentence, and the book

⁹Oliver P. Temple, *Notable Men of Tennessee* (New York, 1912), pp. 360-385.

¹⁰Statement to author, of Hon. Foster V. Brown, Chattanooga, Tenn.

¹¹Temple, *op. cit.*

¹²Truman, *op. cit.*

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was his. When he ran away from Selby and set up a tailor shop at Laurens Courthouse, South Carolina, he put in nearly all of his spare time reading. A boy who boarded with him at the time later told Benjamin F. Perry, of Greenville, that "you could not pry Andy away from his books."¹³

The common belief that he was uninterested in books and in literature seems equally untrue, judging from a partial list of the books which Andrew Johnson withdrew from the Library of Congress during a considerable part of his Washington career.¹⁴

The sort of books a man reads and re-reads is evidence of some value as to the temper and quality of his mind. No man totally devoid of a sense of humor, no man who never smiled, would have read and re-read, as Johnson did, such books as Charles Lever's *Harry Lorrequer* and *Charles O'Mallery*, or Captain Marryat's inimitable *Japhet in Search of a Father*, and *Mr. Midshipman Easy*. No man completely without imagination would have enjoyed Bulwer-Lytton's novels, or would have read with pleasure the poems of Thomas Gray.

On Johnson's reading list one further finds such varied fare as Vattel on the laws of nations, Addison's *Cato*—parts of this once famous tragedy Johnson knew by heart and quoted again and again—Pope's *Essay on Man*, and Byron's *Don Juan*; Jeremy Taylor's religio-philosophical disquisitions, the works of Livy, and Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*; *Macbeth*, and Aesop's *Fables*, *Ivanhoe* and Rabelais, Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*, Goethe's dramas, and Robinson's *Geometry*. Going further, we find Professor Flint's treatise on milch cows, Herbert on horses, and Buchanan on the grape, to say nothing of *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, McPherson's documentary *History of the Rebellion*, Bancroft's *History of the United States*, and a book on the science of chess.

Surely a man with such reading habits as these must have had a wide-ranging curiosity, as well as an active and inquiring mind. The possession of such intellectual tastes comports oddly with the

¹³Benjamin F. Perry, *Reminiscences of Public Men*, Second Series (Greenville, S. C., 1889), p. 147.

¹⁴At my request, W. F. Roberts, Superintendent of the Reading Room of the Library of Congress searched several dusty old registers, and from their records prepared a list of books withdrawn to Andrew Johnson's order while he was Congressman, Senator and President. Records for some of the years were lost, so the list is only a partial one. Even so, it indicates Johnson had an amazingly broad and catholic reading taste.

conventional picture of Andrew Johnson, of the unlettered tailor-politician, the plebeian who hated charm and beauty and joy.

A man of industry, he believed in hard work and plenty of it. He adopted without hesitation many of the sayings of Poor Richard's Almanac. Thrift, industry, persistence—these things Andrew Johnson understood and practiced. At the time of his death his estate was in the neighborhood of a quarter of a million dollars, quite a sizable sum in those days, and every penny the fruit of industry, thrift, and shrewd investment.

An even more outstanding trait of his character was courage; not merely physical courage—many men have this, only to quail before the impact of a thought. Nor alone the courage of intellectual honesty; Johnson had this, but he had that third and rare type as well, a moral courage which held him true to principle irrespective of its effect upon himself. His career as president can best be epitomized by the phrase, "Courage in the White House." He made many mistakes of judgment; he made many errors in reading the hearts of men; he was guilty of some disastrous temporizings; but he had courage of a notable type.

Here was an instance of physical courage which occurred in the 'Fifties, during Johnson's first term as governor of Tennessee, a time when passions were hot, and bowie-knife and pistol often supplemented verbal argument. A man could not then be governor of Tennessee without being physically as well as politically brave. Johnson well met this test. One morning a placard was posted in Nashville, announcing that he was to be "shot on sight." His friends went to his house to serve as a bodyguard to escort him to the Capitol. "No, gentlemen," he replied, "if I am to be shot at, I want no man to be in the way of the bullet." And he walked alone, and with his usual deliberation, from his home to Capitol Hill!¹⁵

For the next campaign, the Whigs, thoroughly alarmed by Johnson's achievements, drafted Meredith P. Gentry, "the best natural orator in Congress," as their candidate. They were depending upon the support of the Know-Nothings to win. The Democratic State convention adopted a platform reprehending the secret order, but in language mild for the day; while most of the practical politicians besought Johnson to talk about education and the tariff and to leave the Know-Nothings alone.

¹⁵John Savage, *Life of Andrew Johnson* (New York, 1866), p. 46.

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But in the opening debate at Murfreesboro, Johnson carried the war into Africa. He arraigned the secret party for "its signs, grips and passwords, its oaths and secret conclaves, its midnight gatherings, its narrowness, littleness and proscription." In joining the order, he charged, its members "swore to tell a lie." There came a sudden stillness over the audience, full of Know-Nothings, as the Governor, weighing his words, exclaimed: "Show me a Know-Nothing, and I will show you a loathsome reptile, on whose neck every honest man should put his foot."¹⁶

Under this terrible denunciation, the crowd became "pale with rage" and "still as death." Upon his declaration that the order was "no better than John A. Murrell's clan of outlaws," many voices burst out: "It's a lie, it's a lie!" The sound of cocking pistols was heard from many quarters, and men ceased to breathe. But Johnson looked on, grim, unmoved and undaunted. After a moment's deliberate pause, he resumed his speech. There was no outbreak.¹⁷ The next appointment was in another Know-Nothing stronghold; there a committee of Democrats waited on him, urging him to omit the speech. "I'll make that speech," he answered, "if it blows the Democratic party to hell."¹⁸ The result of this frontal assault was Johnson's triumphant reelection; thenceforth the Know-Nothings never asserted themselves effectively in Tennessee.

An even more striking instance of Johnson's courage may be had in his course in the Senate on the eve of the Civil War. Following Lincoln's election in November, 1860, South Carolina precipitately seceded from the Union, and other states of the "Deep South" were preparing to follow her example. The leading Southern Senators were singing their swan-songs in the Senate, and shaking the dust of the Union from their feet. The North was palpitant and trembling, while from the White House, poor befuddled James Buchanan weakly and tearfully surveyed the scene.

But Senator Johnson was not willing to abandon his triune deities, the Union, the Constitution, and the Common People.

¹⁶Temple, *Notable Men*, pp. 385-6.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸W. M. Caskey, "The Second Administration of Governor Andrew Johnson," *East Tennessee Historical Society, Publications*, No. 2 (Knoxville, 1930), pp. 36-42. This study, and one on Johnson's first administration, in No. 1 of these *Publications*, are the best that have been made of these phases of the tailor-statesman's career.

On December 18, he told the Senate that whatever were the legitimate fears and grievances of the slave States, the one place for their redress was within the Union itself. "If this doctrine of secession is to be carried out upon the mere whim of a State," he declared, "this government is at an end." Then he burst forth into an eloquent apostrophe:

I intend to stand by the Constitution as it is, insisting upon a compliance with all its guaranties. I intend to stand by it as the sheet-anchor of the Government; and I trust and hope, though it seems to be now in the very vortex of ruin, though it seems to be running between Charybdis and Scylla, the rock on the one hand and the whirlpool on the other, that it will be preserved, and will remain a beacon to guide, and an example to be imitated by all the nations of the earth. Yes, I intend to hold on to it as the chief ark of our safety, as the palladium of our civil and our religious liberty. I intend to cling to it as the ship-wrecked mariner clings to the last plank, when the night and the tempest close around him. It is the last hope of human freedom.

The only grievance advanced by the South, he continued, was that Lincoln had been elected. But Johnson intended to maintain his place in the Senate, to "put down Mr. Lincoln and drive back his advances upon the Southern institutions, if he designs to make any." In the Senate, the South could check-mate Lincoln completely. "Let South Carolina and her Senators come back, . . . and on the 4th of March we shall have a majority of six in this body against him. Lincoln cannot make his Cabinet . . . unless the Senate will permit him. He cannot send a foreign minister, or even a consul, abroad, if the Senate be unwilling. He cannot even appoint a first-class postmaster. . . ."

"I voted against him," Johnson exclaimed dramatically. "I spoke against him; I spent money to defeat him; but still I love my country; I love the Constitution; I intend to insist upon its guaranties. There, and there alone I intend to plant myself." Concluding, he expressed again his abiding faith, his unshaken confidence, in man's capacity to govern himself. He would stand by the Republic, and he entreated "every man throughout the nation who is a Patriot" to come forward, and rally around the altar of our common country, . . . that the Constitution shall be saved and the Union preserved."¹⁹

¹⁹Frank Moore, *Speeches of Andrew Johnson* (New York, 1865), pp. 77-176.

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Even as Johnson spoke, a nation of 35,000,000 people hung in the balance. The North was "petrified with amazement, if not with fear." This speech, "the first message of courage to the almost despairing North" flashed "as a powerful light on the darkness and gloom of the hour."²⁰ This slave-holding Southern Senator had done what no other Union man in Congress, North or South, had dared to do. Johnson "at once became the most popular man in the North except the president-elect." Alexander H. Stephens was later to pay tribute to the effectiveness of his speech by terming it "the most masterly effort ever delivered by man on earth"; Johnson's influence alone had put a hundred thousand Southern men in the Union armies, and but for that, the Confederate leader said, the South would have gained her independence.²¹

In the final scenes of the Senate debate, on March 2, Johnson again gave courage and support to the Union cause in the North. "Show me who has been engaged in these nightly and secret conclaves plotting the overthrow of the government," he exclaimed. "Show me who has fired upon our flag, has given instructions to take our forts, and our custom houses, our arsenals, and our dock yards, and I will show you a traitor!" The excitement in the galleries could no longer be suppressed. A faint cheer in one gallery was taken up in the others, ending in a tremendous outburst.²² An Iowa man led three cheers for the Union and three cheers for Andrew Johnson of Tennessee. Southern Senators demanded that the galleries be cleared; threats of arrest came from the chair; a spectator swung his hat and shouted: "Arrest and be damned!" Johnson resumed: "Were I the President of the United States, I would do as Thomas Jefferson did in 1806 with Aaron Burr, who was charged with treason. I would have them arrested and tried for treason; and if convicted, by the Eternal God, I would see that he suffer the penalty of the law at the hands of the executioner."²³

Here was a test of intellectual integrity from which most men would have shrunk. It took rare character thus to take a stand which involved enduring the obloquy of State and Southland. Nor were the perils unpredictable; Johnson foresaw the stress and

²⁰Temple, *Notable Men*, pp. 399-400.

²¹Cincinnati *Commercial*, February 1, 1875, giving interview of Victor Redfield, noted newspaper correspondent, with Stephens.

²²Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

²³Frank Moore, *op. cit.*, pp. 293-311.

the hatred and the obloquy. But he went ahead. Who will not glory in his strength?

These episodes illustrate physical and intellectual bravery in Andrew Johnson; there was a further one with a flavor of the categorical imperative, an incident which could not but have aroused the interest of Immanuel Kant. It occurred in connection with that curious intrigue, the *Alta Vela* case.

On February 22, 1868, articles of impeachment had been voted by the House of Representatives against Andrew Johnson, because the President, all too tardily, had dismissed Edwin M. Stanton, that marplot Radical, from his cabinet. In selecting counsel to defend himself, Johnson had retained Jeremiah Sullivan Black, of Pennsylvania, one of the great constitutional lawyers of the day. Inasmuch as for several years Black had been one of the President's closest and most confidential advisors, preparing for him drafts of several important veto messages, the selection was not surprising.²⁴

Alta Vela is an obscure little island in the Carribean Sea, near Santo Domingo. At that time, it was rich with guano, and perhaps remains so to this day. The Dominican government, which claimed title to the island, had given a concession to an American firm to exploit its guano deposits. But there was some dispute as to the Dominican title to the island, and there was a claim that *Alta Vela* really belonged to the United States. Under this American shadow title, a Baltimore firm had claimed the right to exploit the guano, and had retained Black's law firm to persuade the United States government to seize the isle, on its exploitation. The President referred the demand to Secretary of State Seward.

In the course of his investigations, Seward found that in 1859, when Black had been the attorney-general of the United States under President Buchanan, a similar controversy had been submitted to him for opinion. He had then advised that America had no title and should not take possession by armed force. The Secretary of State became convinced that Judge Black's opinion in 1859 was the proper precedent for the decision of Judge Black's plea in 1867, and so reported to the President, who agreed with him, and informed Judge Black, who reluctantly acquiesced.

²⁴For cabinet discussions of Black's employment, see Gideon Welles, *Diary* (Boston, 1911), III, Orville H. Browning, *Diary* (Springfield, Ill., 1930), II, 304-3, 316-19, 322, 344; William H. Moore, *Diary Transcript* (Mss. Division, Library of Congress), March 1, 2, 3, 1868.

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When Johnson invited the Pennsylvanian to be one of his impeachment counsel, the *Alta Vela* decision had been made known to Black, and he accepted the rôle of Johnson's counsel with a clear knowledge of the status of the *Alta Vela* case; more than that, he thanked the President for the latter's kindness in selecting him.²⁵ But in a few days after he had thus accepted, Black began to renew his demands that the Navy Department dispatch a war vessel to seize *Alta Vela*, and thus to put his clients in physical possession of the guano.

When the lawyer did not first succeed in forcing the President to reverse himself, one of the junior members of his law firm went up to Capitol Hill, where he procured a strange document.²⁶ Signed by Ben Butler, at the moment one of the chief House managers of the impeachment proceedings, it urged that a war-vessel be sent to seize *Alta Vela* for Black's clients. Thad Stevens, John A. Bingham, and John A. Logan, three others of the House impeachment managers, formally signed their concurrence. Jeremiah Black then took this blackmailing epistle to the White House, hinting broadly that if the President would not meet these demands, he would resign as his counsel in the impeachment case.²⁷

Consider for a moment the circumstances. Here was the President of the United States, soon to be tried for alleged high crimes and misdemeanors, and here was his trusted lawyer threatening that, unless the President took action in this private case which would inure to the lawyer's private benefit, he would retire. Were he to do this, the report would immediately go abroad—as, indeed, it did—that, after examining the case of the House against the President, Judge Black had become convinced of Johnson's guilt, and had therefore withdrawn. Almost surely a fatal blow to any chance the President might have of escaping conviction upon impeachment.

On the other hand, there was some shadow of doubt as to the ownership of *Alta Vela*. It was a negligible island, held on suffer-

²⁵William H. Moore, *op. cit.*, April 30, 1868.

²⁶See Jeremiah Sullivan Black Mss., Library of Congress, for letter of Murguindo, Baltimore, March 2, 1868, to Black, assigning one and one-half per cent of *Alta Vela* recoveries to Black "in trust" for securing aid in putting through the claim. It was immediately following receipt of this letter that Colonel Shaffer, Black's junior, secured the Butler letter. For a thorough discussion of the New *Alta Vela* evidence, see also George Fort Wilson, *The Age of Hate* (New York, 1930), Chap. XXIII.

²⁷William H. Moore, *op. cit.*, March 18, April 10, May 4, 1868.

ance by a weak and feeble government. Was it not much more important that Alta Vela be seized, than that the President should suffer conviction? Any "practical" man would have said that such was the case. But not so Andrew Johnson. "I will suffer this right arm to be cut off," he said, "before I will sign any such paper."²⁸

Judge Black did resign, and this Alta Vela case is an ineradicable blot upon his professional career. But it has another rôle in our annals: It remains to this day as a unique instance of moral courage on the part of an American President. The men are not many who are willing to venture almost the certainty of deposition from the Presidency rather than to do even a small thing which they feel is wrong. Surely this constitutes a high point of courage in the White House. Only a fine flame can burn so clear.

²⁸*Ibid.*, March 18, 1868.

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