

# THE TRAGEDY OF JEFFERSON DAVIS

BY CLARENCE H. POE

Among the leaders of Southern sentiment, Mr. Poe is typical of the younger group. Born since the close of the Reconstruction Era, he inherits the finer traditions of the South without having been embittered by memories of its harshest experiences. As editor of the *Progressive Farmer*, of Raleigh, North Carolina, he has not only rendered service to agricultural progress in the State, but has also given voice to liberal and progressive opinions on social and political questions. He is a member and Vice-Chairman of the Child Labor Committee of his State, and has done much to further the cause of the liberation of children from industrial burdens. He is also Secretary-Treasurer of the State Literary and Historical Association.—THE EDITORS.

THE celebration in all parts of the South a few days ago of the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Jefferson Davis again directs attention to the singularly tragic career of the famous Confederate chieftain. A Shakespeare could make of it a story that would interest the ages. In fact, there is hardly a character in all the tragedies of the great playwright whom misfortune follows so persistently as it did the executive head of the short-lived Southern republic. Called of the gods to lead in sorrow but in imperial pride the foredoomed cause of a belated feudalism in its death-grapple with that growing spirit of democracy which had become the ruling passion of the age—why did this not promise in itself enough of tragedy to satisfy the fates? But it would seem as if destiny had set itself, through fourscore years and with many forms of trial, to break the masterful spirit of this man, only to find that through it all “he winced not nor cried aloud.”

The magazines this month, this month of the Davis centenary, themselves illustrate in striking fashion the tragedy that still attends his memory. In these reviews even this month his name is barely mentioned, while articles already beginning foretell the coming deluge of literature that will mark the centenary of his great antagonist, Abraham Lincoln, in February of next year. Born in the same State and but a few months apart, the lives of both these men lay hold mightily upon the imagination; and in both the tragic is the major note.

While reared in greater comfort, the early life of Davis seems hardly happier than that of Lincoln himself. Marrying at twenty-five the daughter of Zachary Taylor, her death a few months later almost prostrated him, and for years afterwards he lived in seclusion, helping his brother in the management of their Mississippi plantation and fitting himself by study for the tasks he was later to assume. Distinguishing himself for gallantry in the Mexican War, and winning laurels as Representative and Senator in Washington, this season of seeming prosperity lasted only long enough for the fates to fit him for the supreme tragedy in which he must ever stand conspicuous in history.

To few men has come a harder task than that of guiding the destinies of the loose confederation of jealous sovereignties that made up the Southern Confederacy. If Davis had succeeded, he would have deserved a mighty place in history; that he failed is not convincing proof of weakness. The very principles that called his government into being had in them the menace of failure. Leaving the Union because of their adherence to the doctrine of “States’ Rights,” each Southern commonwealth was jealous of whatever attempt at power the new central government displayed, and every effort made by Davis to increase the efficiency of the National organization provoked criticism. In his own Cabinet were bitter critics; the Vice-President of the Confederacy differed with him violently; in both houses of Congress his policies were under constant fire; the

brilliant editor of the Richmond Examiner turned his caustic pen against the President; and Rhett, of the Charleston Mercury, went so far as to suggest impeachment itself. When the war ended and the horror of Lincoln's assassination maddened the people, the bitterness of the times had so fully done its work that the North was ready to believe Davis a party to the awful crime. For two years a prisoner on the charge of treason and complicity in assassination, the man who but a few years ago had seemed indeed to stand on fortune's crowning slope now drank the bitterest dregs of disaster and humiliation. And then, as if fated to typify in American history that

"Unhappy master whom unmerciful disaster  
Followed fast and followed faster,"

Davis came from this ordeal and engaged in business only to see his company fail after a few years of effort, while bereavement and other misfortunes crowded thick upon him. Three sons had been born to him. One of these fell from a window in the Executive Mansion during the war and was killed; in 1874 another died of diphtheria, while the only one to reach manhood died just as he began business at the age of twenty-one in 1878.

The tragedy of such a life should appeal to the heart of the Nation, and it is proof of the kingly spirit of the man that he was never humbled. An eyewitness described his trial, after two years of confinement in prison, much of the time shackled like the common criminal, in these words:

Mr. Davis, though looking better than I expected, is only a shadow of his former self; but with all his dignity and high, unquenchable manhood. As he entered the densely crowded court-room with his proud step and lofty look, every head reverently bowed to him, and a stranger would have sworn that he was the judge and Judge Underwood the culprit.

The pity of it is that the tragedy did not end with the life of Davis, but that there are yet deplorable misconceptions of the man on the part of the general public. I am not an apologist for Mr. Davis; I am not even an ardent admirer of him, certainly not in comparison with Lee or Jackson or other Southern heroes of the Civil War. I would, however, have our people realize, howsoever short

he fell of being a great statesman or nation-builder, the pathos of Davis's life, his indomitable courage, the purity of his character, and his modest but definite contributions to sectional readjustment and reconciliation in his last years. He was perhaps too much of a doctrinaire; he let his personal friendships sway him too much in his official relations; his brilliant exploits in the Mexican War and his notable success as Secretary of War in Pierce's Cabinet seem to have given him an exaggerated idea of his military genius; he was inexcusably slow, perhaps, in realizing the desperate straits of his army toward the last; and admittedly slower than Lee and other great Southerners in accepting the new order of things after the war.

The recognition of these facts, however, affords no justification for the perpetuation of admitted errors concerning the Confederate leader.

For a long time it was believed in the North that he had supported repudiation in Mississippi. The truth is, he wrote a pamphlet opposing repudiation, and presented it boldly to the leader of the opposition.

For a long time it was believed that he had plotted against the Union, in order that he might head the Confederacy. The truth is that he did not seek or desire the Presidency, but wished a place in the army, and received the news of his election as President with undisguised sorrow.

Many critics have charged that he was a failure as the new nation's chief executive. The truth is that circumstance foredoomed the occupant of the office, whatever his ability, to almost certain failure.

For a long time it was believed that he was responsible for the mistreatment of Union prisoners, and guilty even of plotting against the life of Lincoln; but historians of both sections now admit the groundlessness of these charges.

There has also been a widespread belief that Mr. Davis persistently encouraged disloyal sentiment in the South after the war; but this charge, as we shall see in a moment, is also without foundation.

Nor would this catalogue of the ele-

ments of tragedy in the career of Mr. Davis be complete if I did not mention that savage thrust of his evil genius which even now will not let his memory rest, but sends to the United States from the South another Jefferson Davis, who in bearing and manner and speech is the antipodes of the dignified and cultured Senator from Mississippi fifty years ago.

Many stories are told illustrating the striking yet thoroughly easy and natural dignity of the Confederate President. In my office this week a man who knew him years ago said, "Mr. Davis was the only man I have ever known who knew how to walk." And his dignity was the same whether he was dealing with prince or pauper. When in Raleigh a score of years ago, a number of prominent men called to see him at the hotel, and he excused himself from them after a time in order that he might speak with his old negro servant, who had gone to his room to pay his respects and to talk with his former master.

It is my desire especially, however, to correct the current misapprehensions as to Mr. Davis's attitude toward the Union in his last years. What he may have said in 1871 is not a fair criterion, for the South was then in the midst of the saturnalia of Reconstruction, the excesses of which were calculated to drive the bravest men into despair and distrust of the future. A friend of mine who knew him in the later '70s declares, "There was no bitterness about him;" and this idea is borne out by the closing chapter of his monumental work on "The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government." Hear him also in 1878:

We have recently been taught that those whom we had considered enemies (measuring them by standard bearers whose hearts were filled with malignity) in our hour of trouble had hearts beating in sympathy with our grief. We have been taught by their generosity, that bounded with quick response to the afflictions of the South, that the vast body of people at the North are our brethren still. And the heart would be dead to every generous impulse that would try to stimulate in you now a feeling of hostility to those so large a majority of whom have manifested nothing but brotherly love for you.

Even more striking is the testimony of a man who heard Mr. Davis speak on

the occasion of his last public appearance and who says: "Mr. Davis spoke for an hour or more. Every word he uttered admonished loyalty to the Union and the burial of all sectional feeling. Its effect was to hasten the growing reconciliation of the North and South, and the earnestness of his message can never be forgotten by those who heard him." The scene of this address was the Seventh Mississippi Democratic Convention, the time the fall of 1888, a year before Mr. Davis's death, and the occasion, as my informant reports it, singularly pathetic and dramatic. Colonel Stockdale, a Pennsylvanian by birth, had just been nominated for Congress, and Mr. Davis, happening to be in the city, was sent for and asked to address the Convention. It was late afternoon, and the last rays of a setting sun fell upon the white hair of the aged statesman as he stood before his hearers. Himself the ambassador of a vanished idea, the representative of a dead era, and a man who in the turmoil of eighty troublous years had suffered enough to make one of smaller mold vindictive and bitter, he brought to the young sons of the South a message showing such serenity of temper and catholicity of spirit that the fates for once seem to have grown kind to the man they could not humble; certainly nothing in all his life became him better than this last public scene in the tragedy of Jefferson Davis. In a time-yellowed paper now before me I find the first paragraph of Mr. Davis's speech on the occasion given as follows—and it makes a fitting word with which to close this sketch of a man with whom fate and history have dealt unkindly, but whom the future will vindicate from many misconceptions of our time:

Mr. Chairman and Fellow-Citizens: Ah, pardon me! The laws of the United States no longer permit me to designate you as fellow-citizens, but I am thankful that I may address you as my friends. I feel no regret that I stand before you this afternoon a man without a country, for my ambition lies buried in the grave of the Confederacy. Aye, the grave of the Confederacy! There have been consigned not only my ambition, but the dogmas upon which that government was based. The faces I see before me are those of young men. Had I not known this I would not have appeared before you. Men in

whose hands the destinies of our Southland lie, for love of her I break my silence, to speak to you a few words of respectful admonition. The past is dead; let it bury its dead, its hopes and its aspirations. Before you lies the future—a future full of golden promise, a future full of recompense

for honorable endeavor, a future of expanding national glory, before which all the world shall stand amazed. Let me beseech you to lay aside all rancor, all bitter sectional feeling, and to take your places in the ranks of those who will bring about a consummation devoutly to be wished—a reunited country.

## A COLLEGE THAT PIONEERED

OBERLIN: 1833-1908

BY WILLIAM B. SHAW

**A**N old man stood in the dooryard of his California home, some years ago, and sketched the story of his life. One of our Western empire-builders, he had played his part, not without adventure, in the drama of expansion and exploration. Twice he had led a wagon train across the plains before a transcontinental railway was more than a dream. More than one rude frontier community owed to him a stimulus to decent living. A man of exceptional bodily and mental vigor, he had used his powers to make the world about him better. Knowing these facts, I was interested in his personal explanation. Before he had gone very far in the narrative it became clear that one dominant influence had virtually shaped his career. He had been a student at Oberlin in the days of Finney and Mahan, and the impulse that came to his youthful spirit from the Oberlin teachings of the '30s accounted very largely for all that he had done in the half-century of active life that followed. If I could repeat to you the story that the old man told to me, you would have the secret of Oberlin's early growth; for it was by molding and inspiring hundreds of such lives in the three decades preceding the Civil War that Oberlin helped to make a nation's history as well as her own. Of the 36,000 men and women who in the past seventy-five years have had some part in the Oberlin microcosm, there have probably been few indeed who have not received from their contact with the institution certain definite impressions that have more or less modified all their later lives. The Oberlin influence was

always a positive, even an aggressive, influence, and, whether we fully sympathize with it or not, we must admit both its persistence and its inherent virility.

The founders of Oberlin had something more in mind than to organize a college, or, in the phrasing of those times, "a seminary of learning." They wished to plant a colony in the Ohio forests and to dedicate it to righteousness. The humanitarian impulse was strong in their undertaking. They gave to their enterprise the name of a man whom no American, so far as one knows, had ever seen—a humble Alsatian pastor, whose work in a remote village of the Vosges Mountains, foreshadowing in some respects the "institutional church" of later times, had been brought to the attention of the famous Unitarian clergyman, the Rev. Dr. Henry Ware, Jr. The sketch of Jean Frédéric Oberlin which Dr. Ware published and circulated in America made a distinct impression on the imaginations of two Presbyterian missionary preachers in northern Ohio—John J. Shipperd and Philo P. Stewart. What Pastor Oberlin had been able to do for his mountain hamlet in the Vosges they hoped to do for the wilderness of northern Ohio—and, more than that, they looked forward to the rapid peopling of the Mississippi Valley and were eager to influence the life that should be developed in that great domain. The fathers of the Oberlin idea, like the gentle pastor whose life they wished to emulate, were men of peace, but in the working out of their scheme conditions were soon encountered which made this modest