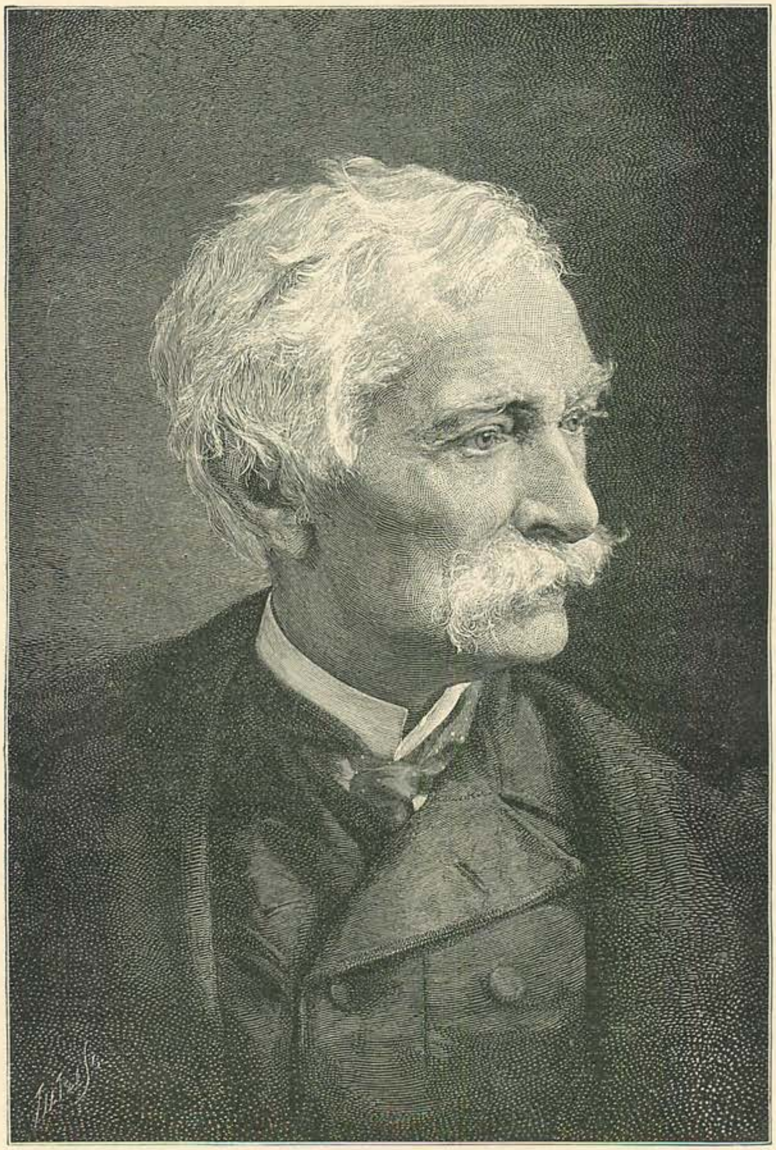

R. M. Johnston

AT the second of the recent Authors' Readings in Washington in aid of the cause of international copyright, Dr. Edward Eggleston, introducing one of the readers, said:

"A few years ago there began to appear in the magazines stories in dialect by an unknown writer. These were so full of quaint humor and individuality as to mark the arrival of a new man in our literature. I thought I saw here the hand of a vigorous young man destined to make a name in our literature, and to push us old fellows off the board, when once he should have reached his maturity. I now have the pleasure of introducing to you that promising young man, Colonel R. M. Johnston."

Richard Malcolm Johnston was born in Hancock County, Georgia, March 8, 1822. His grandfather was the son of an Episcopal clergyman, and a Virginian, of Charlotte County, who emigrated to Georgia when it was comparatively new ground. On the side of his mother, who was Catharine Davenport of the same county, his ancestors were also Virginians.

His father was a large planter, for that part of the country. He began with a farm of 500 acres, which, by gradual purchase, he increased to 2500. The early years of the boy were spent upon this farm; and here he received the impressions which have determined his tastes for life.

This region, called middle Georgia, was a strip of country about 100 miles long, from east to west, and 60 broad, with the city of Augusta as its metropolis. When settled, it was a mere oasis of civilization in the midst of a desert of barbarism. The country round about was either uninhabited or occupied by Indian tribes, which were forced back on all sides as the settled region gradually and slowly enlarged its borders. The life here was almost as circumscribed as it would have been in a desert island. These conditions may account in part for its rugged independence and charming provincialism.

As society settled and clarified, the classes naturally separated. Since no violence marked this separation, there was nothing of the strained relation so often found in our American society. Master and servant were brought into direct relation, without the intervention of the hated overseer. The plantation was usually not too large for the owner to take direct supervision of it,— to know his servants personally, and to visit the "quarters," which were not very far from the "big house." The perfect healthfulness of the climate made life possible all the year round on the plantations,— for white master as well as negro servant. In many parts of the South the arable land lay in river bottoms, low sea coasts, or swampy land, almost the counterpart of the country where the African race had been acclimated for thousands of years, but which was death to the white race. In these low-ground plantations the master had very little in his relations with his slaves that was personal. The races naturally grew apart. Many of the large planters did not even know all of their own slaves by sight, and their welfare was intrusted to an overseer. Of course, under these conditions, there was very little chance that the negroes, huddled together, and away from the helpful association with their masters, should rise much above their old heathenism and barbarism. Though in the main fairly well fed, well clothed, and well housed,— from interest, if from no better motive,— they were lamentably ignorant. Such plantations were very hot-beds, where voodooism and witchcraft flourished mightily.

In the middle Georgia region, in which Richard Johnston was growing up and taking his earliest impressions, everything was the reverse of this. On his father's farm the field hands were on the kindliest terms with the white members of the family, especially with the children, who delighted to visit the quarters, to hear the stories and to feast upon the crackling bread and roast sweet potatoes, that never seemed quite so perfect anywhere else.

The children, black and white, grew up together, getting into the same scrapes, talking the same patois, riding double in going to mill for the weekly grinding of meal — sometimes the white boy in front, but quite as often the other way. The institution of slavery existed here in its mildest form; it was, in the main, the patriarchal institution of the Bible, buying and selling being the exception, not the rule. Servants and their families descended from father to son, or were sometimes willed away, the servant being given, within limits, his choice of a master.

The relations between the field hands and their owners were here very much the same as they were, in other parts of the South, between the household servants and their masters.

Here no impassable chasm shut off the "po' whites," completely ostracizing them, as was the case in many parts of the Southern States. Life was almost archaic in its simplicity. The poorer classes were treated by their neighbors of the better class with the confidence and respect that their sturdy uprightness and self-respect commanded. They were a simple, unlettered folk, full of hardihood and loyalty. They "did what they pleased with the king's English, but were true to the behests of all honor": the men were brave and the women were virtuous. This is utterly unlike the picture that has been so often drawn of the Georgia "cracker."

Among the children of this gentle-hearted, simple-minded people, Richard Johnston grew up, forming friendships which colored all his future life, and furnish the key-note to that life and work. In the midst of the anomalous conditions of this society a group of character writers, unsurpassed by any others, have arisen, led on by Judge Longstreet in his rude but graphic pictures of the wholesome, jovial life of its earlier days, followed by Joel Chandler Harris, in his inimitable *Uncle Remus*, and Richard Malcolm Johnston, in his equally inimitable stories of cracker life. The reason is not far to seek, why just here this school of realistic literature took rise — because the material was here, and the writers were an integral part of the life they undertook to depict, in a sense true of perhaps no other region of the South. The school lacks the idealism of Cable and Page, though Page's realism is exquisitely well balanced with the ideal; but that the conditions were not destructive of the growth of an ideal genius perhaps needs nothing more than the mention of one name, reverently honored wherever it is known — Sidney Lanier came also from this same middle Georgia country.

Until he was eight years old, Richard Johnston lived in the midst of this simply happy, untrammeled life, absorbing its characteristics day by day, and being molded by its influences. For four years he attended what is known in some regions of the South as an "old field school." Some poor, broken-down farmer, or business man, at the end of his resources, would betake himself to teaching. For a mere pittance he would undertake to impart to the children of the neighborhood his small store of knowledge; reading, writing, and ciphering was usually the limit. The teacher did not possess knowledge enough to hurt the sturdy little lads and lassies who came to be taught, and who managed between times to learn many a lesson in kindliness and courtesy, especially the boys in helping and guarding the girls, of whom less was required, both in scholarship and behavior, than was asked of the sterner sex.

"The Goose-pond School," the first story in the earliest series of "The Dukesborough Tales," is a genuine picture of the old field school, touched with the quaint humor of its writer. No one can read the story without feeling the warm-hearted, loving recognition of all that is good as well as a full appreciation of all its absurdities. The uncouthness of the master, his brutality and craven cowardice, were exceptional but not impossible, and they serve to bring out into clearer relief the system, the school, and the "scholars" than a more commonplace and peaceable teacher would have done.

In 1830, when the boy was eight years old, Mr. Johnston moved first to Crawfordville, then to Powelton, the "Dukesborough" of the tales. This he did to give his younger children the benefit of better schools than they could find in the country. At this time Powelton was a finished town of never more than one hundred and fifty inhabitants. It is to-day not larger than it was then, while Chicago, at that date a smaller town than Powelton, has in the mean time gone up to — Heaven and the census takers alone know where.

Powelton, however, possessed a school which was a successful rival of the town proper; it had over one hundred and fifty pupils, besides teachers, other officials, and servants. For many years this school was carried on by excellent teachers, usually from the New England States. Here the boys and girls — for it was a mixed school — were prepared for college, or were "finished," as the case might be.

At this school Mr. Johnston's children entered and began serious study. "At thirteen," Colonel Johnston said, in talking over these old times, "I was madly, hopelessly, intensely, bottomlessly in love with a young lady of twenty-six, one of my teachers. The four years that must elapse before, according to my notions, I should be eligible to marry her, I thought of as I would now think of four thousand standing between me and the consummation of my highest earthly hope."

A curious friendship had existed for some time between the boy of thirteen and a whimsical bachelor of forty — a neighbor of the Johnston family. To this friend the boy confided the secret of his passionate attachment for his mature lady-love, with all its attendant thrills and hopes, woes and despairs. His friend received the confidence with the utmost gravity and sympathy, and advised him to confide in his mother — a piece of advice which he religiously followed. After pouring out the whole matter in her sympathetic ear, she said, with a curious, suppressed smile:

"My son, I would advise you, whatever you do, not to let your father know the state of your affections. He would assuredly give you a thrashing."

This suggestion is used in a very amusing way in "The Early Majority of Mr. Thomas Watts," one of the first series of "The Dukesborough Tales."

The youthful lover's hopes were dashed by his inamorata's marrying some one else. After the proper interim of desolation and dark despair over his crushed hopes, the lady teacher of twenty-six had a successor in the person of a young girl of fifteen. One is irresistibly reminded of David Copperfield and the eldest Miss Larkins in this experience.

These early and ardent love affairs, as intense and serious as any later experience could possibly be, were very characteristic of the Southern boy of the past. They sometimes ended in a temporary eclipse of the youthful lover in desperation and impenetrable gloom, and sometimes in them lay the germ of a happy married life. They were as different from the objectionable flirtations and fastness, so often seen among the children of the present day, as the light is different from darkness: full of ardent dreams of self-immolation, of daring courage, of tender protection, of reverent adoration for his lady-love, worthy of any knight of chivalry — beautiful they were and touching in spite of their absurd unreality.

After leaving the Powelton school the boy went to college, where he was graduated in 1841. He taught two years, and then began the practice of law with Linton Stephens, a younger brother of Alexander H. Stephens, as his partner. For ten years he continued at the bar, in the northern and middle circuits of Georgia.

A lawyer's life, in those days, when the country was so thinly settled that no one small district afforded sufficient litigation to support a single lawyer, was a peculiar one. A bevy of practitioners following the court in its sessions made a peripatetic society for themselves. The scenes in court were sometimes irresistibly funny; the peculiarities of the people, the incongruity of setting, all supplied material for uproarious mirth in the symposium that followed each day's work.

The dialect, so familiar to these men in their childhood, became indelibly engraven on their memories by repetition in the stories they told, and their native gifts as *raconteurs* found an admirable field for development in these days filled with court experience and the nights filled equally with laughter.

In answer to the question, "How is it that you never 'slip up' in the dialect of the crackers?" Colonel Johnston replied, "Slip up in my vernacular! How could I? I talked it when I was a boy with the other boys. I often, now, find myself dropping unconsciously into it. When a middle Georgia man gets 'mad,' I assure you he does not use the stately anathemas of the Charlestonian or Savannese; he just 'cusses' roundly in the cracker 'lingo,' and gets an immense amount of satisfaction out of it."

I have often heard native Georgians drop in the most charming way into this dialect, when they were in a light or tender mood, particularly when talking to little children.

In 1844 Mr. Johnston was married to Miss Frances Mansfield, of the same county (Hancock), whose father was from the State of Connecticut. Twenty-two was quite a sober age for those days, but his wife was only fifteen. Marriages used to be contracted at absurdly early ages, especially in the Southern States. There was something besides climate to account for this. Housekeeping there was such a very simple affair. If, as often chanced to be the case, the youthful lovers belonged to families whose plantations adjoined, a slice was taken from each, a modest house was built, sometimes of the timber on the place and by domestic carpenters, and with the overflow of household goods from the homesteads the arrangements were easily and cheaply made, and the young couple were married and took possession, and began a simple happy life like that from which they had detached themselves. Their homes were very full of comfort, their needs, beyond the inevitable education, especially the college course for the boys, made no heavy drain upon the family resources, and by the time the boys were old enough for that the means were there.

Certain of the household servants from one or other of the parent homes went with the young people, and they, with their children, formed an integral part of the new household, and grew up and grew old with it.

After ten years of this life at the bar, Mr. Johnston was offered three positions almost at the same time — a judgeship of the northern circuit, the presidency of one college, and a professorship in another. This latter offer, as being most congenial, he accepted, and was made professor of *belles-lettres* in the State University, Md., a position which he held for four years, and then he opened a boys' school at his plantation near Sparta. There he carried on a very flourishing school in connection with his farm till 1867. In this year a sad domestic bereavement, the death of a daughter just grown up, made old places and associations unbearable. Giving up a school of 60 pupils, of whom he took 40 with him, he returned to Maryland, intending to form a school there. This he did a few miles outside of Baltimore. Since that time he has been teaching, lecturing, and writing.

His first story appeared under the nom de plume Philemon Perch, in the "Southern Magazine," a periodical, largely eclectic, which was published in Baltimore. In this, as in all his other stories, he went back to the old home life of his early childhood. With the tendency to classical allusion so dear to the Southern heart, he says: "Of all places on earth, it is the dearest to me. The academy grove seems to me now more beautiful than anything in Tempe or Arcadia could possibly be."

This love for old associations, old places, old times, shines through all his work; it qualifies the fun in every description. No touch of ridicule or shade of contempt for the primitive simplicity of living, the clumsy laboring after expression, the narrowness of thought that marked that intensely provincial life, ever mars his work. A loving, tender light shines through the quaint humor; it plays over every incident, and irradiates every homely detail of life he depicts, lifting it above all touch of sordidness.

The merit of his work received almost immediate recognition. No one was so surprised as its author at the success of this his first literary venture; other stories followed, but it did not seem to occur to Colonel Johnston to seek a wider field for his work, or to think of his writing as a source of income, for he had contributed the early stories without asking remuneration. In 1879, however, his dear and valued friend Sidney Lanier persuaded him to submit a story to "Scribner's Magazine," now THE CENTURY. When this was accepted Mr. Lanier's delight was unbounded, both because the writer was his friend, and because the life so vividly depicted was sweet in his memory.

This story, "Mr. Neelus Peeler's Conditions," forms the point from which Colonel Johnston dates his literary career. It is a remarkable fact that an author who has deservedly attained such wide recognition for the freshness, broadness, and humor of his work should have been over fifty years of age before he attempted it, and that he should date his literary life from his fifty-seventh year.

From the beginning Colonel Johnston has loved his work and been faithful and conscientious in it. He does not write rapidly, nor please himself easily. The stories that have such an easy, impromptu air have sometimes been written over and over again. Speaking of the principal female character in his novel "Old Mark Langston," he said: "I meant to make her mean, like her father; but before I had written fifty lines about her, she just turned herself out of my hands" [with a very graphic gesture], "and there she was before me; she seemed to say: 'Don't make me mean! I am a woman. You never knew a woman mean like that'; and I had to stop. I just could not do it. I cannot, somehow, be rough with my women; they always seem to reproach me. I cannot forget the reverence due to their feminity." After a pause, "No, I cannot do it."

There is no plot in his stories carefully devised; it is not so much a story he has to tell as a life he has to depict. The nucleus of each sketch is not a thing, but a person. He takes a character or two, perhaps; as he writes, they become defined and grow into roundness and reality under his hand. The incidents are for the sake of the characters, not the characters for the sake of the incidents.

The *mise en scène* is always photographically accurate; every detail is true. "As long as the people in my stories have no fixed surroundings, they are nowhere to me; I cannot get along with them at all."

Colonel Johnston has it in view to write a story of the higher village life about Powelton, which he says was equal in refinement, culture, and charm to any society he has ever known, and somewhat peculiar. It is, however, always difficult, after following a certain vein, to work out of it. The demand for short stories is much greater than for novels, either as books or serials. In consequence he has been rather crowded into the short story direction, and especially in the delineation of the cracker type.

Five books from his pen have been published besides "The Dukesborough Tales"—"Old Mark Langston"; "Two Gray Tourists," a book of sketches of travel; "Mr. Absalom Billingsbee and Other Georgia Folk"; and, in conjunction with William Hand Brown, a history of English literature, and the Life of Alexander H. Stephens.

In speaking of his future work, Colonel Johnston said: "In going back to my past life, and in attempting to make a worthy record of the limited provincial life in the midst of which my childish days were passed, I have drawn a sweet solace for the sadness of my exile, of being so far from old places, old friends, even old graves. The stories are all imaginary, but they are in harmony with what I have seen and of which I have sometimes been a part. I loved this people and this district, and in doing so have loved many of the most gifted and most cultured and most distinguished men in dear old Georgia."

Sophie Bledsoe Herrick.

LOVE ASLEEP.

I FOUND Love sleeping in a place of shade,
And as in some sweet dream his sweet lips smiled;
Yea, seemed he as a lovely, sleeping child.
Soft kisses on his full, red lips I laid,
And with red roses did his tresses braid;
Then pure, white lilies on his breast I piled,
And fettered him with woodbine fresh and wild,
And fragrant armlets for his arms I made.
But while I, gazing, yearned across his breast,
Upright he sprang, and from swift hand, alert,
Sent forth a shaft that lodged within my heart.
Ah! had I never played with Love at rest,
I still had lived, who die now of this hurt,
He had not wakened — had not cast his dart.

Philip Bourke Marston.