



REV. J. H. MASON KNOX, D. D., LL. D.

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JAMES HALL MASON KNOX,

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The Rev. James Hall Mason Knox, D. D., LL. D., was born in New York City, June 10th, 1824. He died in Baltimore, Md., January 21st, 1903. Within these two points of time he lived a life that adorned the doctrine of God, which he professed and practiced from early childhood, and preached for nearly three-score years.

The blood of generations of godly ancestors flowed in double streams from both father and mother. The paternal ancestors came originally from the north of Ireland, while those of his mother came from Scotland. The name he bore was a happy combination of both its patronymic and matronymic origins. But it did not make its wearer of kin to those Jews whose piety consisted mainly in their having Abraham to their father. For Dr. Knox's piety was not chiefly ancestral or his standing an inheritance from his godly forbears.

His father, the Rev. John Knox, D. D., was born in Gettysburg, Pa., in 1790. He was graduated in 1811 from Dickinson College, and then studied theology under the illustrious Dr. John M. Mason, his future father-in-law. He was licensed to preach the gospel by the Associate Reformed Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1815, and in the following year (1816) ordained in New York. In the same year he was called to the pastorate of the Collegiate Dutch Church of New York City.

He remained in this responsible charge, becoming, and for twenty-five years continuing to be, its senior pastor. In its summary of his life and character, the *Manual of the Reformed Church in America* says of Dr. Knox (page 550), as we may say of his son, "His was the greatness of goodness."

The mother of Dr. Knox, the subject of this sketch, was a granddaughter of Dr. John Mason who was born in Mid-Calder, Scotland, in 1734. At the age of twenty he lectured in Latin with as graceful ease as in English. At twenty-four he became assistant professor of logic and moral philosophy in the Anti-Burgher Theological Hall. In the spring of 1761 he was ordained, and sent to America. In the summer of 1762 he was installed pastor of the Cedar Street congregation of New York. He opposed successfully the proposed establishment of an arch-bishopric in the colonies. He served also as a chaplain in the army of the Revolution. He died April 19th, 1792.

His son, John Mitchell Mason, the grandfather of the subject of this sketch, was born March 19th, 1770, in New York City. After graduating from Columbia College in 1789, he studied theology for two years with his father and the Rev. Dr. Livingston, of the Reformed (Dutch) Church, finishing his preparatory course in theology in the University of Edinburgh. He was licensed in November, 1792, but a few months after his father's death. The character and effect of his preaching as a licentiate will be seen by an undesigned coincidence in the contemporary letter of the Rev. John Cree on page 92 of this number of the JOURNAL. A gratifying insight into the character of his father will also be seen in the same letter. The eloquent young licentiate was ordained and installed the next year (April 18th, 1793) by the Associate Reformed Presbytery of New York as the successor of his father in the pastorate of the Cedar Street congregation. Released from this charge, May 25th, 1810, he became pastor of a colony in Murray Street. He was professor of theology in the Seminary of New York from its organization, November, 1805, until its suspension. He edited the *Christian's Magazine* from 1807 to 1809 alone, and in 1810-11 jointly with Dr. John B. Romeyn. He was provost of his Alma Mater (Columbia College) from 1811 to 1816. This position was

specially created for him, that his great executive abilities might be utilized by the college.¹ One of the first results of his administration was a decided revision of the course of study. Through ill health he resigned his pastoral charge and his connection with the theological seminary. He afterwards became president of Dickinson College, resigning in 1824. In his closing years he united with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. He died December 26th, 1829. Dr. Mason was eminent as a pastor and author; a founder and professor of one of the first theological seminaries in America; an earnest and zealous originator and promoter of measures advancive of Christian union and foreign missions, and a founder, secretary, and life-long supporter of the American Bible Society. Much of a like capacity, Christian spirit, and active career appeared in his grandson, Dr. J. H. Mason Knox, the subject of this sketch.

Fifty-two years after his illustrious grandfather, Dr. Knox was graduated from Columbia University, receiving from it his degree of B. A. in 1841. His Alma Mater conferred also upon him the degree of M. A. in 1844, of D. D. in 1861, and of LL. D. in 1866.

Dr. Knox was a student of the Reformed (Dutch) Theological Seminary of New Brunswick, graduating therefrom in 1845. He was licensed to preach the gospel by the Reformed Classis of New York, July 29th, 1845, at the early age of twenty years.

The next year (September 3d, 1846) he was ordained to the gospel ministry by the Presbytery of Newton, Synod of New Jersey, and installed pastor of the German Valley Church, where he remained until 1851. For two years thereafter (1851-1853) he was in charge of the Reformed Dutch Church at Easton, Pa., whence he was called to be pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Germantown, Pa. In this relation he continued sixteen years (1853-1869). This was the longest pastorate in the history of this important church, now nearly a century old. In 1873 Dr. Knox was called to the Presbyterian Church of Bristol, Pa., where he remained until his election to the presidency of Lafayette College, at Easton, Pa., in 1883.

¹See Note, page 122.

Entering the Board of Trustees of Lafayette College in the same year (1865) with its great benefactor, Ario Pardee, Esq., Dr. Knox was chosen President to succeed Dr. Cattell at the initiation of Mr. Pardee, as is shown by Dr. Cattell in his memorial address (*Ario Pardee*, p. 23), in which he says:—

“To my honored successor in the presidency [Dr. Knox] Mr. Pardee was the same sympathetic and helpful friend and counsellor. Dr. Knox had taken his seat in the Board the same year with Mr. Pardee, and, like him, had given his hand and his heart to the work. There were but few important committees of the Board upon which both of these men were not placed; and Mr. Pardee soon learned to appreciate the high character, the learning and ability, the sound judgment and conscientious performance of duty which distinguished his colleague. When, therefore, in 1883, the presidency became vacant, Mr. Pardee at once turned to Dr. Knox (as did the other members of the Board), and besought him to take the vacant chair, and he was always to him the same steadfast, helpful counsellor that he was to me.”

The following note of Prof. Selden J. Coffin, of Easton, to Mr. Charles B. Adamson, of Germantown, is here inserted through the courtesy of the latter:—

“Rev. James Hall Mason Knox, D. D., LL. D., took his place as President of the Faculty in November, 1883, and at the following commencement, in June [24th], 1884, delivered his inaugural address in Pardee Hall, on which occasion most appropriate and cordial addresses of welcome were delivered to him, for the Trustees by Mr. Ario Pardee, for the Faculty by Prof. Addison Ballard, and in behalf of the Alumni by Hon. Robert E. James, of the Class of 1869.”

Dr. Knox remained at Easton until his resignation of the Presidency, in 1890.

The task laid upon Dr. Knox as President of Lafayette College was in itself one of great difficulty and weighty responsibility. It was all the more so, because it compelled him to follow one (Rev. Wm. C. Cattell, D. D., LL. D.) who had achieved such great popular success, and had been so exhaustive of the immediate resources of the friends of the College. But assuming it as he did, with confidence in the help from on high, and with the gracious coöperation of his most highly esteemed and beloved helpmeet, Mrs. Knox, his administration

conserved the best results of that which it followed, and kept the College in line for the great work yet to be done by it and for it. And though Dr. Knox felt constrained, after a comparatively brief administration (six years), to lay aside the burden of the Presidency, yet he remained a faithful trustee and devoted friend of the College until the close of his life.

Dr. Knox's rare executive ability, his clear intuition, and his remarkable accuracy of observation and judgment, led him to be entrusted, even burdened, with many important matters in his ministerial and ecclesiastical relations. Such matters, many of them of a delicate and difficult nature, were often, almost as a matter of course, assigned to him, with the assurance that they would be wisely and safely administered.

His comprehensive intellectual and moral grasp of a case led him to such a conclusion as could seldom be successfully opposed or refuted. The writer well remembers the first instance of this kind coming under his special notice. It was a complicated case, involving civil and ecclesiastical legalities as well as moral and spiritual considerations. Without taking any notes, and after many protracted meetings in a tedious investigation, Dr. Knox presented a report embodying the essential facts and leading principles with such a comprehensive insight and grasp that it was confirmed and commended by the civil courts that finally settled the case.

Dr. Knox's administrative ability was strikingly manifested in his pastorates of the First Germantown and Bristol Churches. Of the former, Dr. Thomas Murphy says (*The Presbytery of the Log College*, p. 314) that

"during it the contributions of the congregation to objects of benevolence were increased in a marvelous manner, so that it became one of the most liberal of our churches,"

and of the latter (*ibid.*, p. 361) that

"his services to this church [Bristol] were very valuable, among other things in that he stimulated it to a very high degree of liberality."

But his executive interest extended beyond his own congregations. He filled effectively many important positions in the interests of the Church at large. He was from its beginning an

influential supporter of the work of the Board of Ministerial Relief. He was a member of the General Assembly's Committee on Ministerial Relief, which by direction of the General Assembly (May 29th, 1876) was erected into a Board, obtaining its charter October 21st of the same year (1876). He was continued a member of this board until his death, being then the only remaining charter member upon it. He has told the writer, with great gratification, that the first collection for that board was taken up in his congregation.

Doctor Knox became a member of the Executive Council of the Presbyterian Historical Society in 1884, and so continued until 1889. In 1890 he was chosen a vice-president of the Society and was annually re-elected, the last time on January 8th of the present year (1903), but a few days before his death. He was present at the annual meeting on that date, taking a deep interest in its proceedings and closing it with the benediction. After the meeting, when all others had gone, he remained with the writer in the rooms of the Society for about an hour, speaking of the interests of the Society, of other matters connected with the Church and with former parishioners, and of some of a more personal nature. With his usual fidelity in any position that he held, he showed his practical interest in the Society by securing during the past year a number of new members (6) living in Baltimore. The sturdy Christian manhood and blameless life of Dr. Knox throughout his whole career as a minister of the gospel, in public and in private, developed in him a character that shows what divine grace can do to make a man a vessel meet for the Master's use. None excelled him in the light which shone from him, not dazzlingly, but steadily, in the good works which he did unostentatiously and unceasingly. With but little of the eloquence that thrills with instant, often evanescent, enthusiasm, he spoke with the accents of truth and conviction that were likely to result in consent to the conclusion or action that he proposed. He was a faithful preacher of the truth that he learned from the Bible and professed in his ordination vows. As a pastor he was sympathetic, devoted, and warmly loved. Without seeking or courting it he unconsciously won the confidence as well as the respect and affection of those

who knew him intimately. This was shown in the many that came to him with their troubles or sorrows, sure of his sympathy, advice and assistance. And he had a good name among those that are without as well as among those who knew more of the inner man. He was a man of pure thoughts and clean lips. In all the thirty-two years of the writer's acquaintance never was heard an unbecoming expression or a story that jarred upon the spiritual sense. Intimacy ever engendered a higher and more loving regard.

In Dr. Knox there was a remarkable combination of frankness and reticence. The former sometimes had the appearance of bluntness, and the latter sometimes verging to an appearance of haughtiness. Yet this reserve was due to a degree of diffidence that seemed strange in such a man of affairs as Dr. Knox. But it was most largely due to a modesty innate, invincible, yet charming in so strong a character. This gracious trait sometimes kept him from resenting, though not from feeling, treatment that in others would have developed an acute case of ruffled pride. There have been occasions when a righteous indignation was evidently but in vain struggling to break down his habitual reserve or self-control. But this man of God had mastered his own spirit. This reserve was also due in part to a habit of self-repression. His own high ideal or standard of what ought to be and his clear insight of the importance of the principles or interests involved, seemed often to make him feel that the results or conclusions reached did not measure up to the needs of the case. Besides, his conscientious, often excessive, self-criticism made him remarkably free from criticising others. Perhaps few have ever approached him in the unflinching and practical recognition of the parity of the ministry. This was conspicuously apparent in his demeanor toward his younger brethren in the ministry and those occupying un-prominent positions. Of such he was watchfully appreciative, his generous heart noting in them worth that many would ignore or fail to see. A talk with Dr. Knox has cheered and enlightened many a discouraged minister or parishioner, his fatherly, friendly spirit warranting and impelling him to be as frank and helpful as the circumstances would require.

As a member of the Presbytery of Philadelphia North or its legal predecessors for nearly fifty years (October 5th, 1853, to January 21st, 1903) he retained undiminished his high place in the esteem and affection of its members until his translation to the General Assembly and Church of the First-born on high. "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace" (Ps. 37: 37). The secret of this godly life and the source of his ministerial fidelity are found in his habitual consciousness and assurance of the Divine Presence, as appears in the opening and close of his inaugural address as President of Lafayette College.

"In view of the weighty responsibilities of the position I am to occupy," said Dr. Knox (p. 4), "as a hundred times already I have made it, now again my appeal is to Him without whom I can do nothing. 'If thy presence go not with me, carry me not up thence.'"

And in closing the same address (p. 17) he said:—

"With a diffidence so great that I cannot tell it, yet with a confidence so great that I cannot define it, but believe it to be of God, I take up this great work. If I am rightly here, then it shall prosper in my hands; if I am not here rightly, then it shall prosper in the hands of others, for prosper it shall—the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. Ye that make mention of the Lord, pray for me."

Two most competent witnesses confirm the view independently taken of Dr. Knox in this sketch. Both were members of the Sabbath school of the First Church of Germantown, when Dr. Knox was their pastor. Both have known him intimately ever since, and for many years have been co-presbyters with him, one as a pastor, the other as a ruling elder. The elder has also been associated with Dr. Knox as a trustee of Lafayette College. In all the advancing relations which they jointly occupied with him as peers they have not ceased to look up to him with the esteem and affection of their youth. The Rev. Alexander Henry, pastor of the Hermon Presbyterian Church of Frankford, Pa., in his report to Presbytery (Philadelphia North) speaks of "the beneficent stream of liberality that has flowed and is flowing from the First Church of Germantown and how much Dr. Knox had to do with opening up

this fountain." "Dr. Knox was not only highly esteemed for his works' sake; he was a man greatly beloved." "His influence in the Presbytery, in the Church, and in the world at large was far reaching and always for good."

Mr. Charles B. Adamson, an elder in the Wakefield Church, Germantown, into the formation of which he came with his father, the late William Adamson, from the First Church; also a graduate and trustee of Lafayette College, writes of Dr. Knox; "He was a man for whom I had a very great deal of respect; but it is difficult to express in words one's opinion of such a man. I have heard people state that Dr. Knox was haughty, but this I know is not the case, as Dr. Knox's apparent haughtiness was due to an extreme diffidence. My earliest recollection of a minister of the gospel was in the person of Dr. Knox, and so long as he lived I was brought in contact with him more or less, and he was indeed a great man; great in his power of thought, wonderful in his power of reasoning, and with a heart as large as it is given to man to have; and I think we shall all of us by and by discover that Dr. Knox was great in his successes, as he was really successful in every undertaking to which he put his hand; and yet he seemed always to feel that he wished his successes had been greater than they seemed."

In 1845, shortly before going to the German Valley Church, Dr. Knox married Miss Louise Wakeman, the daughter of Mr. Burr Wakeman, of New York City. Mrs. Knox died at Germantown, leaving two daughters, Jeanie de Forest Knox (Mrs. William D. Barbour), who died in 1871, and Louise Wakeman Knox (Mrs. Louis C. Tiffany), who is living in New York City.

Six years later, Dr. Knox married Miss Helen Ritchie Thompson, the daughter of Judge Oswald Thompson, of Philadelphia, who survives him, living with their only son in Baltimore. Thither they went a few years ago that their son, Dr. J. H. Mason Knox, Jr., might continue his studies in medicine at the Johns Hopkins University, in which institution he is now filling an important position. With him also, while pursuing his studies in Europe, Dr. and Mrs. Knox spent a large part of last year (1902) across the sea, returning but a little while before the illness which so suddenly ended the life so feebly set

forth in this sketch. Dr. Knox felt greatly benefited by this sojourn abroad, and appeared to be, as he repeatedly expressed himself at the last annual meeting of the Society, in better than his usual health. Yet this was but a fortnight before his death at his late home in Baltimore.

The funeral services of Dr. Knox were held on January 24th, 1903, in the Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, where, when in the city, he was wont to worship. They were conducted by the pastor, the Rev. Dr. Marcus A. Brownson, with whom were associated the Rev. Dr. B. L. Agnew and the Rev. Dr. Henry C. McCook.

“And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them” (Revelation 14: 13).