THE LIFE AND SERVICES OF JOEL R. POINSETT, THE CONFIDENTIAL AGENT IN SOUTH CAROLINA OF PRESIDENT JACKSON DURING THE NULLIFICATION TROUBLES OF 1832

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BY
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OF

JOEL R. POINSETT.

I.

[Through the courtesy of the surviving member of Mr. Poinsett's family, the Historical Society has been placed in the possession of a mass of papers which illustrate very fully his public and his private life. That life was one of singularly varied interest. Mr. Poinsett was probably the greatest American traveller of his time, penetrating into the most remote and then little known regions of both the Old and the New World; he afterwards won distinction in the diplomatic service of the country, and, above all, he was known as the leader of the Union party in South Carolina during its conflict with the Nullification heresy of 1832. The papers which he left at his death, and which his family have placed at the disposal of the Historical Society, seem to be of great value and interest, as they throw light upon the important events in which he took part. An attempt has been made so to connect them in the following narrative that their true significance as contributions to American history may be understood.]

The career of Mr. Poinsett is not very familiar to this generation, at least in this part of the country, and indeed, the recollection of the great events which are associated in our history with his name during more than a third of the present century has strangely faded from the memory of most people. But fifty years ago his reputation as a statesman of a high order had been fairly gained by his public services, and was generally recognized. His title to this reputation seems, on a review of his public life, to have been on the whole a just one. He belonged in his early manhood to that small but brilliant body of Americans who, with plenty of means, many accomplishments, and much leisure, travelled with very observant eyes most extensively in portions of Europe, then little visited by cultivated people of any country. Their qualities gained them admission into the highest social circles in the countries in which they travelled, and they succeeded by some means, of which those who came after them seem to have lost the secret, in knowing everybody worth knowing, however high their rank or official position throughout Europe, and in leaving a most favorable impression of themselves, and of the nation which they may be said to have informally represented. The curiosity of the foremost courtiers and statesmen of the Old World (men whose names are now historical) was naturally excited by observing the peculiarities of the citizens of the New, as they were exhibited in the types who, at that era, presented themselves as Americans. It cannot be doubted that men like Washington Irving in his younger days, the late Mr. George Ticknor, and Mr. Poinsett among others did us a service with the governing classes of the Old World during the first third of this century which it is not easy to over-estimate.

Mr. Poinsett was not only a great traveller in his early manhood, but wherever he went he was proud of being known as an American citizen, a title which his own personal qualities invested in the eyes of those with whom he was brought in contact with consideration and respect He wandered too through the most remote regions of

Russia. He became acquainted with the Tartars, the Persians, the Armenians, the Georgians who live in the Trans-Caucasian range of mountains, and along the shores of the Caspian Sea, forming various tribes whose rulers had never heard of the existence of America; later, his travels led him to the other end of the world, to South America, where he was sent by our government to ascertain the condition of the different provinces at that time in revolt against the Spanish Crown. In all these countries he became favorably known to the most distinguished men of the time, from the Emperor Alexander of Russia down to the famous rev olutionary chiefs in South America. Everywhere he was received and treated with the utmost kindness and consideration. His great intelligence, his wonderful tact in dealing with men, and his perfect sincerity gave him a commanding influence wherever he went, and that influence was always employed for the advancement of his country's interests.

The four years he passed in Congress (1821 to 1825) added much to his fame, owing to his long familiarity from personal observation with all that concerned our foreign rela tions. He was thought so peculiarly fitted for the diplomatic service that he was appointed our first Minister to Mexico. There, even with his experience, he found it difficult to steer clearly through the embarrassments which were caused by the distracted and revolutionary condition of the country, but the knowledge that he gained was invaluable to us, and he at least taught the Mexicans, on a memorable occasion, a lesson in regard to the respect due the American flag (of which more hereafter) which they have never forgotten.

He returned from Mexico just in time to take the lead of the Union party in South Carolina in its conflict with the nullification and threatened secession of that State,—a post peculiarly suited to his active and intrepid spirit. It seems to me that he has never received proper credit for the courage and intelligence with which he maintained the cause of the Union in those dark days when the great forces—social and political—not only of South Carolina, but of a consid-

erable portion of other States of the South, were in the hands of the nullifiers, and of those who sympathized with them. By his influence, and that of the Union party led by him, supported by the inflexible determination of President Jackson to maintain the Union by any display of force which might be necessary to accomplish his object, the conspiracy for nullifying the laws of Congress, which was embodied in the famous ordinance of South Carolina in 1832, was broken up, the ordinance itself was repealed, and South Carolina was once more brought into her normal relations with the general government.

Some years later Mr. Poinsett became the Secretary of War in the Cabinet of Mr. Van Buren. His administration of that office was marked by intelligent and comprehensive measures in regard to many subjects of national interest, among others the improvement of the artillery of the army, the honest treatment of the Indians dependent upon the government, and the organization of the famous exploring expedition under Commodore Wilkes. He laid the foundation of much that has since been done by the government, by advocating a wise and liberal national policy with reference to these and kindred objects. During his whole career Mr. Poinsett proved himself a thorough and typical American. His notions of public policy were essentially national, and his allegiance to the government of the United States was always paramount. As such a public man, especially a public man from South Carolina imbued with such principles, and always standing firm on the national side, is something of a political curiosity, his life and career seem well worth studying.

Joel Roberts Poinsett was born in Charleston on the 2d of March, 1778. He was of that Huguenot stock whose force, intelligence, and virtue have been so conspicuous in the history of the whole country, and especially in that of South Carolina. His father, Dr. Elisha Poinsett, was an eminent physician in Charleston, and he seems to have taken uncommon pains in the training of his son. Young Poinsett's school days were passed in Charleston and in Greenfield, in

Connecticut, in which latter place he was under the care and instruction of the Rev. Dr. Dwight, afterwards so famous as the President of Yale College. His constitution was naturally frail and delicate, and it was found that his health suffered so much from the severe climate of Connecticut that he returned after two years' absence to Charleston. There, for a time, he pursued his studies, but in 1796 it was determined to send him to England, and enter him as a pupil at St. Paul's School in London, where his relative, Dr. Roberts, was the Head Master. There he made great progress, particularly in his knowledge of the languages. He was a respectable classical scholar, for he speaks in after-years of having studied Herodotus in the original Greek, as a guide-book to his travels in Southern Russia and the shores of the Caspian Sea. In modern languages he became very proficient. He acquired a fluent knowledge of French, German, Italian, and Spanish, and made some progress in Russian, a sort of knowledge which proved eminently useful to him as a traveller.

From London he went to Edinburgh, intending to pursue his medical studies there. He soon became the favorite pupil of the celebrated Dr. Gregory, then one of the foremost Professors in the University. His health, however, broke down, owing to confinement to his hard work as a medical student. By the advice of his friends he abandoned for a time the study of medicine, and went to Portugal. Returning with restored strength, he became a pupil of Marquois, who had been a Professor in the Military Academy at Woolwich. The bent of Mr. Poinsett's mind and tastes was always towards the life of a soldier, and under Marquois he acquired a thorough theoretical knowledge of his profession, and his body was strengthened by the active military habits and discipline in which he was trained. His father, however, was averse to his entering the army in time of peace, and he was called back to Charleston, and became a student of law. This pursuit, however, was little suited to his active, not to say restless, habits, and it was soon abandoned. He was then permitted by his father to return to