## JOHN C. CALHOUN.*

Nothing can exceed the skill with which the political career of the great South Carolinian is portrayed in these pages. The work is superior to any other number of the series thus far, and we do not think can be surpassed by any of those that are to come. One is quite willing to agree with the author, that the story of the life of John C. Calhoun, as it is here given with substantial truthfulness, constitutes a real tragedy,—not a tragedy in which blood is shed or tears excited, but a drama more tragical than the imagination would ordinarily conceive, in that it is the history of a man of superior intellect, high ambition, sterling character, and entire purity, who yet, by devoting his mental powers and the whole force of his iron will to a doomed cause, sinks into the grave at the very moment when he foresees the convulsion which is inevitably to defeat the end of all his exertions. It is said that, in common with Alexander Hamilton, Calhoun is still waiting for a biography which would do him full justice; but the one before us is sufficiently comprehensive to last as long and give as correct an idea of the eminent man it commemorates as perhaps a more ambitious production.

An admirable introductory chapter informs us of the birth of John Caldwell Calhoun, in March, 1782, of Irish parentage; his education at Yale and Litchfield, Connecticut; and the general course of his youth, terminating at less than thirty years of age in his election as a Member of Congress. His education appears to have been defective so far as positive knowledge is concerned, but what he lacked in breadth of view he made up by penetrating intensity, bold independence in thought, and a keen instinct of the true nature of the things which came within the circle in which his mind moved. "He learned to think before his memory had become burdened with the thoughts of other people." From 1811 to his death in 1850, his life was substantially spent in public affairs, and formed a significant part of the history of his country. As a Member of Congress, Secretary of War, Vice-president, United States Senator, and Secretary of State, he always discharged the duties of these offices in a manner to command public attention, and in such a way as to render his fame quite as prominent as that of any of the distinguished men who adorned the first half of this century.

Sixty years after Calhoun occupied the War office, the Indian policy of Mr. Hayes's Secretary of the Interior was based upon the lines indicated by the South Carolina doctrinarian, and his reasoning, as quoted by Dr. Von Holst in relation to the treatment of the Indians, has scarcely been improved upon in the lapse of time; and so far as Civil Service reform is concerned, the arguments of Calhoun, noticeably in speeches made as early as 1835, read like modern editorials, pointing out the evils of the present system. "Would not," says Von Holst, "the very life-blood of the body politic be poisoned, if the government should fall into the hands of mercenaries with whom politics constituted only a trade to which they devoted themselves for the sake of the spoils of office? Was not the love of country in danger of being drowned in the whirlpools of party strife, if the official spokesmen of the National parties should be men who owed their position to the dexterity with which they gathered followers around their standard by means of the spoils?" "Last, but not least, would not the people begin to turn with disgust from politics when they saw the statesmen more and more ousted by mere bread-and-butter politicians? And what is the life of a democratic republic worth, if the people accustom themselves to consider politics the monopoly of a set of men whom they do not respect?" In these and other sentences he indicates the tenor of Mr. Calhoun's line of thought upon the subject, and quotes this extract:

"When it comes to be once understood that politics is a game; that those who are engaged in it but act a part; that they make this or that profession, not from honest conviction or an intent to fulfil them, but as the means of deluding the people, and through that delusion to acquire power; when such professions are to be entirely forgotten, the people will lose all confidence in public men; all will be regarded as mere jugglers, the honest and the pa-

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triotic, as well as the cunning and the profligate; and the people will become indifferent and passive to the grossest abuses of power, on the ground that those whom they may elevate, under whatever pledges, instead of reforming, will but imitate the example of those whom they have expelled."

Calhoun's remedy seemed to be to "place the office-holders with their yearly salaries beyond the reach of Executive power, and they would in a short time be as mute and inactive as this bill proposes to make them," —referring to a bill to prevent the officers of the government from electioneering, or attempting to control or influence the election of public functionaries; but, as Mr. Von Holst points out, the true remedy consisted in putting office-holders beyond the reach of *the party in power*, rather than the power of the Executive.

But it is in connection with the question of State Rights and Slavery that the fame of Calhoun will attract the attention of the generations which succeed him; questions which, after all, were but one question, for it was upon the extreme doctrine of the sovereignty of the States that he relied in defending the "peculiar institution." He seemed to believe that absolute safety for slavery in the Union might be secured by adhering to his own views of the construction of the Federal Constitution; but he left out of view the fact that constitutional theories, whatever their merits in the abstract, cannot prevail in the long run against the judgment of a majority of those for whom the Constitution was framed. Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Seward no more clearly apprehended and stated the irrepressible conflict than Mr. Calhoun had done years before; but Mr. Calhoun assumed that the submission of the North to the dominance of the ideas of the South upon the institution of slavery could be secured through the protection of a fundamental law, as he construed it, and that the conflict might therefore be determined in its favor; while Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Seward, with a better comprehension of the spirit of liberty which was the determining principle of the Constitution, saw that the contest would cease to be irrepressible when the institution which precipitated it had ceased to exist. The war of the Abolitionists against the South, said Mr. Calhoun, "is a war of religious and political fanaticism, mingled on the part of the leaders with ambition and a love of notoriety, waged not against our lives but our characters"; and he insisted that the enemy must be met on the frontier, and said, "The power of resistance by a universal law of nature is on the exterior. Break through the shell, penetrate the crust, and there is no resistance within." Accordingly, he opposed with all his power the reception of petitions for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia (January, 1836). But, as our author says, how could he avert the impending danger by trying to hermetically close the Capital at Washington, if the moral and religious sentiment of the world was at war with slavery? How could the religious, moral, and political convictions of Congress prevail if the people did not entertain those convictions? As a political question, it would have been simply absurd to decree it out of existence by legislative resolution, and doubly absurd if it were a moral and religious question. Slavery had, at the first, been spoken of in a deprecatory way by Southern statesmen. It had for years been treated as an institution not to be commended, but as one which the people of the South, finding fastened upon them, were justified in defending upon that ground. But Calhoun, whose views into the future seemed to be more sagacious and far-reaching than those of his contemporaries, perceived that unless it could be defended for its own sake it must finally be overthrown. He therefore defended it as a positive good, and declared that it was the outgrowth of the natural relation between the white and the black races; that social and political equality between them was impossible, and that no power on earth could overcome the difficulty, thereby justifying the position of the Republican party in making the political and social equality of the freedman one of the principal planks of its platform. He insisted that the Federal government was bound to suppress the anti-slavery agitation without meddling with the "peculiar institution"; that it was bound to do what the State commanded, and that the exercise of an unquestioned constitutional power was no valid excuse for refusal. So, from claiming for each State the right to nullify, so far as itself was concerned, a Federal law which it deemed unconstitutional—which was his position in the tariff controversy,—the later position gave each State the right to invalidate a constitutional and Federal law and render it unconstitutional by passing a conflicting law; the final result of which would be the systematization of anarchy. In any event, Calhoun took the position that the South would never yield upon the slavery question, because it could not do it; and the day came when this declaration was put to its final test.

Calhoun seems to have forgotten all that he had seen during his college years in New England, or he never could have supposed that the people of the North could be made to believe that slavery was a positive good. The institution was the product of a different

civilization, and, as is here pointed out, it is self-evident that "two civilizations with antagonistic formative principles cannot permanently co-exist in one political organization, because they move in opposite directions"; hence, when the South took the last step, the doctrine of the positive good of slavery, it was the beginning of the end.

It is impossible, however, to continue the examination of this able biography. The whole discussion in relation to Calhoun's position is eminently philosophical and just. The leading position which he took in the annexation of Texas, the manner in which he loosened the bridle of the Constitution and then endeavored to stop his disciples from rushing along the track on which he had started them, are admirably depicted. The Mexican war broke out, and was recognized by Congress, which, as Calhoun said, "closed the first volume of our political history under the Constitution, and opened the second," and no mortal could tell what would be written in it. He would have found that the fate of slavery was sealed, and while he would have repelled the charge that the war was the legitimate consequence of the annexation of Texas, yet he had taught the people that territorial acquisition was a natural duty, and he could not cry "Hold!" when the need of such acquisition for the safety of slavery had, in his opinion, ceased.

Mr. Calhoun's closing days are well told. To the last moment he manifested the deepest interest and concern in the troubles of his country. "The South, the poor South,—God knows what will become of her," murmured his trembling lips; but he died with "the serenity of mind which only a clear conscience can give on a death-bed." The concluding sentence of this biography is as significant and descriptive as any other in it: "If ever a new edition of the works of the greatest and purest of pro-slavery fanatics should be published, it ought to have a short appendix — the emancipation proclamation of Abraham Lincoln."

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