

MAJOR J. W. POWELL.

PERSONAL REMINISCENCES OF ONE OF HIS STAFF.

BY MARCUS BAKER.

IN person the Major, as every one called him, was of medium height and as a young man rather slight. He told me how, at the time of the battle of Shiloh, where he lost his right forearm, his superior officer, General W. H. L. Wallace, a tall and handsome soldier, mounted on a fine large chestnut thoroughbred, seeing him wounded and the enemy closing in, said: "Here, Lieutenant, we're going to be captured in a few minutes; get onto my horse and go back to the landing at once." So saying, General Wallace dismounted, and, strong-armed as he was, picked up this mere boy-lieutenant who might have weighed 125 lbs., set him in the saddle and sent him away. It was only a few minutes later that this noble officer received his death-wound. Midst the hissing and singing of bullets and screeching of shells Powell galloped back to the landing, about half a mile distant, the red blood spurt- ing from his wounded arm, and soon arrived white and faint. Thence he was taken off to one of the nearby Union gun-boats where the presence and tender care of his young wife brought the prompt attention to his wound that probably saved his life.

The battle over, he was, with others, sent "up the river" to a hospital, from which after some weeks he returned to his command engaged in the operations about Vicksburg. Some years after the war was over, he applied for a pension. Accordingly his record was examined by the pension officers, who found him not pension- able, as the record showed him to be a deserter [!], having been for some weeks after the battle of Shiloh "absent from his com- mand without leave." This absence covered the time when he was in the hospital. Explanations followed, the proper evidence se- cured, the record corrected, and the pension granted. This inci-

dent, however, permanently affected his views as to the evidence in pension cases and made him lenient toward defects in the record. It is so easy, he would say, for a worthy claimant to lack proofs destroyed by war and time. And his sympathetic nature, added to his experience, made him believe that more worthy pension claims were rejected than unworthy ones allowed.

With passing years he grew stouter and heavier. Beside the natural tendency perhaps this was hastened or increased by lack of exercise enforced by the wounded arm, which was tender and frequently painful for so many years. Often in later years prior to the third and last surgical operation, from which complete relief was had, the left hand would almost unconsciously or mechanically take hold of and support the tender stump. Especially was it so if walking or doing anything that gave even a slight jar to the body. So he walked little and rode much. Always fond of horses, he did much riding in buggy and saddle up to the last few years. When engaged in his western surveys, he was loath to let the driver drive, preferring himself to mount the box and with his one hand manage the four-horse team over the rough and trackless regions where his work lay. An early riser, he often had his party on the road at or before daylight, and his early rising habit continued to the end.

In appearance, as we saw him from day to day in the high noon and afternoon of his busy life, he was of medium height, rather stout, deliberate in speech and action, with long full brown beard, prominent eyebrows, deep-set half-closed eyes that had a merry twinkle in them, a noble forehead and loose unkempt hair brushed back and never parted. In manner dignified, affable, courteous, in dress careless but not slovenly, in his soft felt hat, he seemed too much absorbed in his work and philosophy to think of his dress. A constant smoker, he seemed never conscious of the cigar's presence but only of its absence.

It was in the full activity of his middle life that I first met him, when the newly created United States Geological Survey was young and when organisation, methods, plans, policy, and administration were live and burning questions. Into these he plunged with a zeal and an energy that were infectious and which inspired in his associates perfect confidence and a loyal and devoted following. In those days, and particularly during the Congressional investigation of the Hydrographic Office, Weather Bureau, Coast Survey, and Geological Survey in 1885-1886, large drafts were made on the time, strength, and energies of his—I will not say subordinates,

though such they were, but rather upon his—associates and companions, for such he always made them. But no amount of work by any of his comrades could equal that of their leader, whose capacity for work seemed unlimited. Nights, Sundays, holidays were forgotten in the zeal to do the many things that pressed in upon the man who had a reputation for doing things. In the midst of it all, however, his door was always open. He did not appear to hurry, however swift the work in hand went forward, and never showed irritation at the ceaseless interruption entailed by being readily accessible to all comers. He was in this respect like our martyr-president Lincoln who, when the furrows were deepening in his face as the great war wore on, and his faithful helpers sought to persuade him to deny himself to a part of the great throng that sought for interviews, listened kindly and then said as his face lighted up: "They don't want much and they don't get much; I guess I'd better see them." This was the spirit that always prevailed about "the Major's" busy office.

In a high degree Major Powell had the faculty of stimulating his followers and helping them to accomplish the best that was in them. His directions never appeared to be orders. He seemed to be a companion discussing and suggesting plans rather than a director prescribing a course of action, and this practice to those accustomed to different conditions was most stimulating.

He was ever prone to draw from his associates their views and then in a few sentences to lead them to broader ones and to kindle enthusiasm for these wider views. Great as was his personal work, yet much greater was that which owed its inception to his own fruitful suggestion. He rarely printed anything without first submitting it to one or several of his associates for criticism, both destructive and constructive. "Now go for it," he would say, and sometimes add with a twinkle under his shaggy brows, "or ever after hold your peace." The usual outcome of such criticism was not a change of view but rather the reply, "I see I have not made that plain; I must expand it."

If the Major engaged in reminiscence, as he sometimes did, there was often a deeper purpose than mere story-telling or entertainment. There was a principle or a lesson involved, but it was never obtrusive. On one occasion when dining at my house he met a newly appointed Chief of Bureau, one new to Washington and its methods. The conversation turning on administration, he outlined in a few clear, terse sentences the characteristics and methods of five secretaries under whom he had served. "One," said he,

"cleared up his table every night, and so made mistakes. Another carefully weighed everything brought to him, and thus was overwhelmed with details and business impeded;" and so on of others. "But as to one," said he, "the best of all, he met all matters brought to him by his bureau chiefs with the same question, viz., "Is that a bureau question or a department question?" If it was a department question, he gave to it his undivided attention and profound study. Then he decided and his decisions were right; they have withstood the tests of experience and are the rules of the Department to this day."

More and more, as time passed, his interests and thoughts turned toward philosophical reflection and study, and when his chief burden of administration was laid down in 1894 and the care of the Geological Survey was turned over to another, he entered upon the closing chapter of his varied and busy life.

It was about this time that some of his intimate friends arranged to have a bust made of him. Mr. U. S. J. Dunbar had at this time a studio in the Corcoran Building, and here Powell gave sittings to this artist who in the course of a few weeks produced a clay bust which was generally approved as a faithful and satisfactory portrayal. Later a new bust was cast in bronze and is now in the Library of the United States Geological Survey.

During the sittings I was always with him and generally read aloud from something he liked. One thing read was Ruskin's Essays, and as the reading proceeded he would interpret, analyse, and criticise, pointing out the author's strength, weakness, and limitations. Poetry also interested him, and we read Tam O'Shanter, which he knew by heart.

Such were the traits of this strong and noble character as they appeared to one who for a decade was very near to and in confidential relations with him. I count it one of my pieces of special good fortune to have so long enjoyed the intimate friendship of so helpful, so stimulating, so ennobling a companion as Major John Wesley Powell.