

CHAPTER XII.

LIFE AT JOHNSON HALL.

THE last ten years of Johnson's life were among the busiest of his career. War matters occupied but a portion of his time. His greater works were those of peace, his chief idea being the development in civilization of the region watered by the Mohawk and its tributaries. The story of his life now concerns itself with the location of settlers; the education of the Indians; the building of schools, churches, and colleges; the improvement of land and live-stock; the promotion of agriculture, and of the arts and comforts of life. In a word, none more than he carried out the command to replenish the earth and possess it.

Fortune seemed to have no frowns for this one of the chief Makers of America. Popular with his neighbours, and appreciated on the other side of the ocean, his rewards were many. Besides the gift of five thousand pounds accompanying the title of baronet, the king, in June, 1769, made over to him the famous "royal grant" of sixty-six thousand acres on the north side of the river between the East and West Canada creeks, the present town of Little Falls being in the southern centre. This large piece of

territory had been given him by the Mohawks in 1760, as a token of their gratitude and appreciation, Johnson making return for the gift in a sum amounting to over twelve thousand dollars. As no private person could, under the proclamation of 1763, obtain in any way so large a tract of land, the possession was made sure by being given under the royal seal and approbation as a token of his services.

It was, however, as early as 1763 that Johnson chose the site on which to found the village of Johnstown, and to erect Johnson Hall, — as a letter dated May 8, 1763, to Mr. Samuel Fuller, of Schenectady, the architect and builder, shows. Like his former house on the Mohawk, this edifice, so famed in romance and history, still stands, though outwardly somewhat altered in appearance by the addition of modern roofs, bay-windows, portico, and verandas. Only one of the two square towers or houses which flanked the main edifice still remains.

The writer visited the Hall in July, 1890, being pleasantly received by the present owner and occupant, Mrs. John E. Wells, and allowed to see the spacious rooms which, upstairs and down, flanked the superb, wide hall-ways which extend from front to rear doors. The missing block-house was burned by accident in May, 1866. Between the cellar of the mansion and those of the block-houses an underground passage formerly existed, in which my informant often played, until within a few years ago. A circle of Lombardy poplars planted round the Hall, once formed a striking feature of the landscape, — for

these prim sentinels made a strange cordon to the Indians and those accustomed only to the American forest trees. Only four survivors on the east front of the house remain, — the small arc of a grand circle. Of an old walnut-tree planted by Johnson himself, and lovingly preserved as an historical relic, only the vine-covered and flower-adorned trunk was left, in which a squirrel was nimbly enjoying itself. The Hall faces the east, the ground sloping to the left. The mansion has been in the possession and occupancy of the Wells family for over a century.

Passing to the village, a half-mile to the east, I visited the church built by Johnson. Its walls are of the famous graywacke stone which underlies the Mohawk Valley, and which is so widely utilized in edifices. A fire in 1836 that emptied the building of nearly everything, and left only the walls, was the occasion for rebuilding. When this was done, in 1838, the site was so changed that the grave of Johnson under the altar was left outside the new building, and the exact site of it lost to memory. For several years it may be said that the very spot where lay the dust of this Maker of America was forgotten. In 1862 the rector, Rev. Charles H. Kellogg, took measurements, sunk a shaft, and discovered the brick vault. Only a few fragments of the mahogany coffin remained, — the leaden coffin enclosing it having been cut up during the Revolutionary War for making bullets. The skull and a few bones left, together filled but a quarter of a bushel. It is not stated whether the bullet which remained in the wound in Johnson's

body when he died was found ; but the dated gold ring was, and is carefully kept. The relics of once animated earth were enclosed in a hollowed granite block, and re-deposited with solemn ceremonies by Bishop Horatio Potter, a few feet east of the church, in a space of the churchyard which has no other tombs in it. The unmarked mound, eight feet square and six inches high, barely discoverable by a passer-by, had no other decoration than the thin grass which manages to live between the shade of two buildings. The action of St. Patrick's Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons which Johnson founded — his son being the last Provincial Grand Master of the upper district of the Province of New York — is still awaited. Either the Masons, or others who honour Johnson's memory, should set up a worthy memorial of the great man who has stamped his name so ineffaceably on the history of America.

In the neat village itself are many things to remind one of its founder. The chief hotel is named after the baronet. A number of autograph letters and relics are in possession of private persons. Documents in the handwriting of Johnson are in the Masonic Lodge which he founded in the parlour of Johnson Hall in 1772. The gold ring found in 1836 with his dust, and inscribed with the date of an important event, and possibly with the age of his bride, is here. Nor far away, the cradle of black walnut in which Mollie Brant rocked her children is preserved as a relic. In an old innkeeper's book the first entry is that of the great man's name, who ordered the first

glass of grog. Besides the evidences of ordinary human life and infirmity, one cannot go very far in the Mohawk Valley, or in those of the lowlands which hold the tributaries to the river flowing through it, or in the collateral ones on higher levels, but the fruits of a rich and busy life abound.

Johnson, though belonging to the Church of England, was willing to help men who were of the Churches of Holland or of Germany. He assisted all Christians to have houses of worship, — at Fort Hunter, Canajoharie, Burnet's Field, especially; but in other towns and villages tokens of his presence are to be seen. He helped financially the Lutheran and Reformed Germans, and the Dutch congregations, and provided the Indians with missionaries and churches. With Domine Samuel Kirkland, who laboured among the Iroquois for over forty years, and was the founder of the town of Kirkland and of Hamilton College, Johnson was on friendly and sympathetic terms. He greatly honoured the young man's character, and appreciated his labours; and the two frequently corresponded. During one winter while secluded in Cherry Valley, Kirkland was saved from starvation by the Indians, who gathered ginseng, for which they bought provisions in Albany. The root having been just discovered on this continent by a French Jesuit in Vermont, early in the century, already formed one of the staples of American commerce with China.

While it is absurd to say that Johnson first "discovered" the fertility of the Mohawk Valley, it is unquestionably true that he greatly stimulated advance in

agriculture. Under his encouragement many of the Mohawk Indians became happy and prosperous farmers. When the officers and men under the leadership of Sullivan, the New Hampshire general of Irish descent, invaded the country of the Six Nations in 1778, they were amazed at the evidences of Indian thrift, and at the wide areas of richly cultivated land.

These being the piping times of peace, Johnson built a handsome summer-house at Broadalbin, in Fulton County, where he entertained lavishly. Having a healthy interest equal to that of the Englishman in out-door sports, he also erected on the south bank of the Sacandaga Creek a lodge, which has given the place the name it still holds, — the Fish House. The building, which was of wood painted white, with the doors and mouldings painted green, was comfortably furnished. It was frequently occupied in summer, often with gay company from New York or Albany. An orchard, vegetable-garden, well of spring water, sheds for horses and cattle, with poultry and stock, enabled the lord of Johnson Hall, with the assistance of his favourite negro slaves from the Manor, to dispense lavish hospitality to his friends from Albany, Schenectady, the Valley settlements, or even from Manhattan Island. Coming himself on such occasions, in his later years, in a coach and six, it was no infrequent sight to see the like equipages numerous in the grounds of the Fish House. For days together, gayety and bustle filled the grounds, while pleasure-parties of both sexes in the boats tempted to their hooks the finny spoil. Excellent gunning was also pro-

vided in autumn for the gentlemen in the sunken lands and low-lying coves along the Sacandaga, wild ducks and geese being the chief game. Oftener, however, instead of visiting Europeans or fashionable society nearer home, the baronet would be accompanied by his cultured Irish friend and family physician, Dr. Patrick Daly, and by his favourite musician, Billy. Nor is it likely that tradition wrongs him in frequently furnishing him with other room-mates, since chastity was not the shining virtue of Sir William Johnson.

Simms, the gossipy annalist of Schoharie, who seemed incapable of writing history or holding himself to a narrative without meandering off into theology, politics, or preaching, has much to say about Sir William Johnson. Though gathering a valuable harvest, his sheaves need to be well threshed out before using. He has set down in sober print much tittle-tattle which New England historians, as usual when writing about New York, have only too freely copied.

We see that the household at the Hall and in the quarters was almost as cosmopolitan as New York itself. Simms tells us that Johnson's bouw-master, or head farmer, was an Irishman named Flood. He looked after the ten or fifteen negro slaves who lived with their families in cabins on the other side of the Cayudutta Creek, opposite the Hall. They dressed much like Indians, but wore coats. His private secretary, after Wraxall, Croghan, and others, was a Mr. Lafferty, — a good lawyer withal, who attended also to Johnson's legal business. The family physician, named Daly, was a companionable and cultivated gentleman.

Billy, a dwarf about thirty years of age, was a master of the violin, and the presiding genius of the numerous balls given in the Hall when "persons of quality" were guests, or at the village when the tenantry or other citizens had their merry-makings. The gardener kept the grounds "as neat as a pin," and from May to November smiling with flowers. The butler, Frank, was an active young German; and the chief body-guard was Pontiac, a sprightly, well-disposed lad of part Indian blood. He was named after the great conspirator, and was often with Johnson when away from home. Two of the waiters, — probably brothers, — named Bartholomew, were short, thick-set white men. Across the road from the Hall were the blacksmith and the tailor, who did little work outside of the "royal" or "patroon's" household. The numerous progeny and employees of Johnson furnished them with almost constant occupation. One of the most important characters was the schoolmaster, Wall, an Irishman with a rich brogue. His specialty was the teaching of manners and rudiments of English to the children of the tenantry and Johnson's half-breed bastards. It may be well imagined that the training given by Wall was rather to fit his pupils for proper subordination than to be self-reliant patriots. In front of the schoolhouse stood the whipping-post and the stocks, for which truant boys, drunken louts, wife-beaters, and other transgressors, actual and potential, were supposed to have due respect.

Holidays and out-door merry-makings were frequent. The many-sided lord of the manor seemed

most in his natural element when providing or participating in the athletic sports, Irish games and frolics with which he amused Indians and whites, old and young. Himself ever jovial and fond of fun, he entered into the performances with an enthusiasm that was magnetic. The greasy pole with a coin or other prize on the top was set up for the nude Indian children to attempt to climb. The pig with its tail likewise anointed was set free to be caught by him or her who could. Tradition tells how, in one case, an old Indian squaw beat every one in the race, and finally, having caught up a handful of sand, had literally the grit to hold on and win the race. Sack, hurdle, and three-legged races were also favourite amusements.

Besides all this out-door activity and healthy occupation, there was plenty of amusement indoors. The numerous guests who came from all quarters and at all times made Johnson Hall more like a grand hotel than the private house of a gentleman. From April, after the ice in the Mohawk had burst, as it often did, with a sound like cannon, and floated out to the Hudson and to the sea, and the spring floods were over, until the autumnal splendours of crimson and gold filled the Valley, the house rarely lacked guests. Indian chiefs and warriors came at all times; but in summer the paint and feathers of forest fashions were replaced by those from beyond sea. The rouge, powder, patches, wigs, perukes, silken gowns and stockings, silver-buckled shoes, and ruffled cuffs and shirt-fronts from London, or patterned after Piccadilly prints, filled the Hall with brilliant colour.

With musical instruments, a well-filled library, and the last new novel on the drawing-room table, the guests could easily amuse themselves on a rainy day ; while in fair weather saunterings over the grounds of their host, or drives or rides in the beautiful country around, made the daylight hours fly pleasantly. Then, in full dress for the evening dinner, the night soon passed in feasting, drinking, and exchanging news, with chat, gossip, and smoke ; and more than one of the hours of morning arrived before the concourse broke up.

Such a course of life was kept up for years, until the hospitality of Johnson Hall became a proverb, and its revelry, we must add, passed into a byword. Despite his constant out-door life and otherwise good habits, it is more than probable that such luxurious living long persisted in explains why the baronet never saw his sixtieth year.

In practical farming and in horticulture Johnson took great delight, and in his intervals of leisure did much, both by personal example and by neighbourly conference with the farmers, to improve crops and live-stock. He was a regular correspondent of the Society for the Promotion of Arts in England, and of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. Agriculture was one of the themes most often discussed in his letters. He sent frequently to London for choice varieties of seeds, and delighted to see how they fared in our climate and soil. Of horses and other fine stock he was very fond, and to him is due the credit of the introduction of sheep and blooded stallions. He also credits himself with first raising hay, and thus

stimulating the development of improved breeds of cattle. While thus on his table lay the last reviews and best periodical literature of London ; while in his library the European scholars, professors from Harvard and Yale, and English ladies from London drawing-rooms, would all find books to their taste, the pursuit of science indoors and out was carried on with ardour by the lord of the manor himself.

In attendance upon the county fair at Fonda during the summer of 1890, the writer was struck with the variety and excellence of the live-stock, as well as with the richness of the agricultural products of Montgomery County. This county, with Saratoga and others adjoining, has had marked influence upon the development of the region westward. Not a few of the fine specimens of horses and cattle are descendants of the denizens of the Johnson farm of pre-Revolutionary days. Certainly Johnson was one of the benefactors of the race, who made many blades of grass grow where none grew before. Not the least of his good offices was in prevailing upon the British Government to relax the illiberal laws which prevented the agricultural development of the Mohawk Valley. Much of England's troubles with her colonies arose from her determination to keep the American part of her domain as a close market for exclusively British products, and thus to compel the Americans to buy only those goods which were manufactured in England or came from British ports. In thus attempting to nip in the bud all flowering of the native genius of the people, she succeeded in hampering, but not wholly repressing,

American manufactures. Johnson, as we have seen, was able to get removed the restriction against raising wool. Peter Hasenclever, a Palatine German, who owned land next to Johnson's royal patent, started an iron foundry, and though himself failing after long and earnest efforts, unable to surmount the numberless difficulties, gave a great stimulus to the development of the iron industry in Northern and Eastern New York. Philip Schuyler set up a flourishing flax-mill.

Johnson lived to see the fearful results of the determination of the lucre-loving British lords to force their products upon Americans at all hazards. He regretted these violations not only of human rights in general, but of Englishmen's rights in particular; though not so outspoken as he might have been. The Americans, while willing to be customers to the greatest nation of shopkeepers, were resolved not to be considered as buyers, and victims of monopoly only. Johnson fortunately died before the covetousness, avarice, and arbitrary thick-headedness of Great Britain, which had forced the slave-trade, hampered commerce, and paralyzed foreign commerce and home manufactures, compelled the colonists to rebuke her pretensions by an appeal to arms.