

CHAPTER XIX

Return to Knoxville

At the end of the year (1866) I relinquished the lease I had at our first "Retreat" and formed another with Reverend Dr. Pharr a few miles nearer Hopewell. In some respects the location was better. The dwelling house was more comfortable and better furnished. A little income from Tennessee always sent promptly or in advance by our son Crozier, the emoluments derived from my practice, and my journalistic contributions—but especially the skillful labor and attention of our son McKnitt upon a small farm—furnished us an adequate support. The frugal and inexpensive habits of my family with their industry and economy required no heavy expenditures of money. In our secluded neighborhood there were no visits of ceremony, no show, no fashion. We formed our own society—had few associates and no intimate friends. We had not become more selfish, but evidently more domestic. The theater for the exercise of our affections was plainly more contracted, more centralized, not so expansive and widely diffused as before our exile and banishment from our early home.

This was more noticeable on myself. I had never since July 1817 been without office. I had had the professional charge of a very extensive practice, embracing several counties around my residence. I had had the charge of several farms beside the buildings and improvement of my town lots. My mills and ferry gave me additional care and trouble. I was one of the trustees of three colleges and two railroads, and the agent of Tennessee for the sale of her bonds and the purchase of the iron and equipments of the E. T. and G. Railroad. I assisted in building the first steamboat that was ever owned or used at Knoxville. I was state director of half a dozen banks and president of the C. and C. R. R. Bank and president of the branch bank of the Bank of Tennessee at Knoxville. I was also Confederate States depository and had the charge of and disbursed more than forty-two millions of dollars for the Confederate States government. Beside the pressure of these varied engagements I was a frequent contributor to

the scientific, literary, religious and political journals of the country and the author of the *Annals of Tennessee*. In short, from July 1817 to April 1865 I cannot recollect that I was ever idle a whole day. *Omnis in hoc* was my peculiar characteristic. If I had anything to do I was *absorbed* by it till it was finished. *Labor ipse voluptas*. I took pleasure in my business. *Orave est operave*. It was part of my religion to achieve. Achievement was my idol: the good of others my purpose. I had endeavored, as age was advancing rapidly upon me,—having already reached my three score and ten,—to decline further public pursuits. I hailed the surrender of April 1865 with real pleasure and genuine satisfaction as the termination of my public life and public service—and public usefulness.

The reader may imagine—few though can realize—the vacuum thus created in my bosom. My affection and devotion to my country were prominent elements and principles of my nature. These had become a habit and a passion of my soul. But now I had no country to love. I felt that the Union was disintegrated and that its broken fragments could never hereafter be cemented. The coercive policy of Mr. Lincoln had annihilated the Constitution of the Fathers, of the country. Coercion was itself a political suicide, a *felo de se*. It was in direct conflict with the genius of republicanism and at war with the representative principle itself. I felt that even Tennessee, which Mr. Jefferson used to claim as his favorite, had become almost insensibly and unconsciously a despotism: that other states had been reduced to a state of military vassalage and a provincial dependency: that freedom itself was there, only an *ignis fatuus* to mislead and bewilder while it brought neither heat nor light: that the waiting boy of Governor Harris had more political power than the chief magistrate of the former Volunteer State. That the foreman of General Pillow had become more potential in Maury than the hero of Cerro Gordo, and that my faithful carriage driver, Levy, had a controlling voice in the politics of Tennessee and the Union while I myself, the greatest benefactor of my native state, am disfranchised. Was this great revolution in state or Federal affairs brought in existence lawfully, constitutionally, and by the voice of the people—or by tyranny, usurpation and violence? There can be, there is, but one answer. Then have I a country to love, admire, and venerate? I had not.¹ Still I had duties to perform and affections to cherish,

¹ On November 10, 1865, Dr. Ramsey received a pardon from President Andrew Johnson. It was sent to General J. Crozier Ramsey in Nashville. On December 2, Dr. Ramsey informed Secretary of State William H. Seward that he had, in accordance with the presidential proclamation of May 29, 1865 taken the amnesty oath. S. G. Heiskell, *Andrew Jackson and Early*

not diffused over a wide theater as heretofore, but centralized and intensified upon home and neighborhood, my family and friends, my books (borrowed of course), science, literature, etc., etc. These can still be my idols. It was a relief to let go all the rest and cling the more steadfastly to domestic life and the social circle. I have found at our "Exile's Retreat" near Charlotte and Salisbury a more genuine felicity than any other period of my diversified life. I enjoy in 1865-1870 the *otio cum dignitate* of my old age in my quiet seclusion more than when disquieted with the cares and responsibilities of public employment. "Man wants but little here below, Nor wants that little long." Our natural wants are few and easily satisfied, while our artificial wants are innumerable and insatiable.

On the seventeenth of October, 1867, our daughter Susan was married to William Davidson Alexander, Esquire, of Alexandriana, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. His family was old and respectable. He was an alumnus of Davidson College, went with his three brothers into the war heartily and lost heavily during the conflict. He had industry, frugality, and enterprise: is living on his own large cotton farm and near to a railroad and a good market and with the blessing of God the young people will do well. They are in a good Scotch Irish Presbyterian neighborhood, are both of them members of the Hopewell Church and within convenient distance of it and of Alexandriana Academy. Our son Crozier had paid us a long and very pleasant visit during the summer and brought back with him to our Exile's Retreat No. 2 his widowed sister Mrs. Breck. He was urged to remain with us to witness the ceremony of his youngest

Tennessee History, (1920), 2:111. This act, however, did not preclude his appending to his Autobiography a poem entitled "Lines by an ex-Confederate" which began:

"Oh! I'm a good old Rebel
That is a Reb "*so-call*"
For this 'Fair Land of Freedom'
I do not care at all;
I'm glad I fit against it—
I only wish we'd won
And I don't want no pardon
For anything I done"

After four stanzas which reiterated hatred for the constitution and the Declaration of Independence, and joy at the number of Yankees killed, the unknown author concluded:

"I can't take up my musket
And fight 'em now no more,
But I aint agoing to love 'em,
Now that is certain sure;
And I don't want no pardon
For what I was and am;
I won't be reconstructed
And I don't care a d_____."

sister's marriage but his duty to his clients at home called him to Knoxville. I accompanied him to Charlotte and never saw him again.

Colonel F. A. Ramsey had invested the proceeds of his Swan Pond farm in a steam flouring mill not far from Rome, Georgia. He found the investment not very remunerating and while on a visit to us heard of a large property in Rowan County with mills and other machinery, all farming stock, implements, house furniture, etc., for rent. I went with him to see it. We determined to move to and occupy it. It was late at night when the Charlotte mail was brought in. A letter in a mourning envelope attracted my notice. It was from the Honorable J. H. Crozier, my wife's brother, and contained the distressing intelligence that our son General John Crozier Ramsey was dead. . . . I have previously said that our son was most devoted in his affection to all of our family, felt deeply the deprivations that we were doomed to endure and that while enduring himself far greater sacrifices on our account and for our benefit, he never thought of himself, the dangers to his own person, even to life itself. Extracts from his many and excellent letters might here be introduced to this effect, . . . to furnish evidences in detail of the great, unparalleled and irreparable loss sustained by his parents and family by his premature and unexpected death. . . .

At the time of receiving the letter of Colonel Crozier announcing the death of General Ramsey I need not add that I was overwhelmed with grief. Mrs. Ramsey and Mrs. Breck happened that night to be absent from our Retreat on a visit to our daughter Susan, sick at her own house four miles off. McKnitt and myself endured the stroke of that melancholy night, of loneliness and desolation. What added to my grief was that next morning I had to be the messenger to bear the sad news to my wife and daughters at Mr. Alexander's. As I approached that place Mrs. Breck saw me first and before I had uttered a word ran to the gate exclaiming, "What is the matter? Is brother Crozier dead?" During the morning she told me she had had presentiments of this overwhelming calamity but had withheld them from us. Such presentiments I have often experienced. I have known several instances of the phenomenon in others which I cannot stop here to detail. I consider there is nothing in the belief of their truth either unreasonable or unphilosophical.

In a few days I tore myself from my afflicted family and went to Rowan County preparatory to the establishment of Exile's Retreat No. 3. In a few days Mrs. Ramsey and Mrs. Breck reached our new home. Though

sensible in the highest degree of the extent of our late bereavement they devoted themselves to their new domestic duties and we passed our time away with heavy hearts and languid spirit. Oh, how we longed for some Tennessee friends who had known Crozier, our other deceased children, ourselves, and thus knowing could appreciate our loss and our affliction. But here we were in a double sense entire strangers. Not one came in to weep with us, or to cheer us, or to offer the consolations of religion. So true is it that "the *wretch* is always left to weep." Even the pastor of Thyatira, Reverend S. C. Pharr, D.D., only said on his first and last call at our house of mourning, "This is the common lot of humanity." And then alluding to an unfounded rumor that our son had made a very large fee very recently in a land speculation, added "all *that* you will now inherit. He had neither wife nor children. It will now be *your own*." The sordid soul, the unsympathizing heart, and the vulgar breeding implied in such a remark were unbecoming his position and his sacred office and I resented it as such by telling him that instead of comforting us by his visit he had insulted and wounded our feelings and begged him never to speak to us again. Avarice had turned his heart to stone and a heathen would have had more religion and more manners, too. He felt the rebuke and never again entered my house.

The suits that had been instituted by my son in the state and federal courts at Knoxville for the recovery of my real estate made it necessary for me to go immediately to Tennessee.² I dreaded the visit to the scenes of my boyhood and of my manhood, and of my half-century of active public life and extended usefulness to my country. Six years of exile had reconciled me to our changed condition. But there was one change I had never contemplated or expected. How could I go onto Gay Street, to Ramsey's Block in which was my son's law office and find it vacant? There for twenty years or more I had always found him, and met him with the smile of filial affection on his face and of dutiful welcome and fond regard on every feature! That office was now closed!

But my duty could neither be delegated to nor performed by another. I must go there in person. I took the train via Atlanta. The season was

² Dr. Ramsey engaged former Congressman Thomas A. R. Nelson, prominent East Tennessee unionist, to prosecute his suits in District Judge Conally F. Trigg's court. Mecklenburg, with its three hundred acres and ferry, had been sold, March 20, 1865, for \$3750.00 to satisfy a judgment of \$300.00. Ramsey's Block, a three-story brick storehouse on Gay Street had been sold to satisfy a judgment of \$362.00. It brought \$5100.00. The briefs in Dr. Ramsey's cases are in the T. A. R. Nelson Papers in the McClung Collection of the Lawson McGhee Library in Knoxville.

inclement and it would be too cold in February for me to go through the mountains via Asheville. From Charlotte all the way a dim recollection reminded me at every station of some earnest effort to serve the South and to be useful to the country. But I saw them now with a stoical apathy. *Illum fuit*. I arrived at Dalton in the night. Then taking the E. T. and G. train I was on my own road. Every step from there to Knoxville I knew like my own plantation. Of the entire work *magna pars fui*. From the first meeting of the new board at Athens in 184— to the arrival of the first car at Knoxville I had been regularly and annually appointed by the governor a state director. This new board galvanized into life the old Hiwassee Railroad. By Governor Trousdale I was appointed state agent, sold Tennessee bonds at \$104½ and with the proceeds bought its rails and equipments and completed my agency satisfactorily to the state, the community, and the company. This enterprise had revolutionized the trade of East Tennessee. I had sold corn in 1823 at twenty cents per bushel in June, wheat at thirty-three and one-third and beef and pork at two dollars and a half per hundredweight. Corn was now above a dollar, wheat a dollar and a half, and pork and beef five and six dollars. I found thriving villages all along the route and beautiful farms and enterprising farmers all over the country. A new creation had taken place. The metamorphosis was everywhere apparent.

It was night when I left Dalton. Day appeared as the train approached Cleveland. There I received the warm grasp of Tennessee friends who had not seen me since I went up December 1863 with Longstreet. It was so at all the stations we passed—a cordial welcome from Whigs and Democrats—Secesh and Union men.

I stopped at Lenoir's to see my two grandsons, now motherless. One of them I had never seen before: Henry Ramsey Lenoir bore the image of his sainted mother but looked upon me as a stranger. At Lenoir's I met quite a number of old friends and was received as in days of old. I walked with Doctor Lenoir to their private cemetery. I wept over the graves of poor Henrietta, my favorite child and of the favorite of everyone—and especially of my wife and me—James Ramsey Lenoir and his sweet little brother ———, who died on the same night and was buried in the same grave. Promising to return in a few days and make a longer stay, I next morning went on the train to Knoxville. At the depot I was met and surrounded by an immense number of old friends and neighbors, who gave me an intensely warm and enthusiastic welcome. Passengers on the train

the day before had given the information that I was at Lenoir's and would be up the next morning. The concourse at the depot was immense and it was some time before we got into town. I went not beyond Colonel Crozier's office. I could not think of going as far down Gay street as Ramsey's Block and did not do so for several days. That same afternoon I rode out to Riverside with my grandson, Wilberforce Dickson, and remained with my daughter some days. The Sabbath intervened and I went to our old church, Lebanon. Reverend H. Brown was the stated supply. I occupied my old pew. I looked around for the old elders and the old members. Dr. Curry, our last pastor, I knew was dead and so of my brother J. M. A. Ramsey. A new set of elders and deacons had been formed in my six-year's absence—not to "the manor born." The pews were empty. The congregation exceedingly small, irreverent, vulgar looking—anything but Presbyterian people as of old. The church yard was broken down and burned but not much injury had been done to the building itself. But the greatest change was near the site of my old residence, Mecklenburg. Not a single building which I left there in August 1863 was now standing, not a structure left. Mansion, office, library, kitchen, smokehouse, cribs, barns—all either destroyed by fire or water. The sight was mournful. Still everyone present of the congregation greeted me cordially. Even some who had assisted in eviscerating my houses and looked silently on while the flames consumed them, had the effrontery to inquire if I was not coming back. The preacher himself said if I would settle there again he might be induced to retain the pastorate of Lebanon, but without this assurance he would shake off the dust of his feet and leave them at once. He did leave them shortly afterwards.

I had not yet been on the streets in town only as I came in from the train. But nearly a week after my arrival I went into Knoxville. Leaving Colonel Crozier's office I went down Gay Street. Every acquaintance I met bid me a hearty welcome back to my old home and seemed really anxious for me at once to bring back my family and settle again. Old and young, rich and poor, all political parties, all sects without an exception were delighted to see me. I could not without incivility get off the streets. It was nearly twelve o'clock before I reached Cumberland Street. No one can tell the sadness I felt when I went into the office recently occupied by my son and received from his physicians the incidents of his sudden death. Some of the circumstances lead to the suspicion of poison. The judgment of the Great Day will reveal it all. I found he had been robbed of his money. Some of

his own papers, some of mine, cannot be found. The whole thing was shrouded in mystery. For a year before his death the country had become comparatively quiet. Crozier went anywhere without molestation. Once only was he assaulted in the streets. Once a pistol was fired through his window at night. In one of his letters he mentioned the great relief he had experienced. A heavy burden had been taken off him and he felt like a new man. The labor and toil which he had endured for years of investigating my land cases, of hunting up testimony and taking depositions, etc., etc., had come to an end and he had the satisfactory consciousness of knowing that everything had been done in preparation of them for trial and promoting my success. This he imparted to me cheerfully and he could look forward to the time when we all might return and live all together in one house again. Could some diabolical instrument of some of the parties concerned, who knew the thoroughness and extent of his professional preparation in the cases, have been bribed to perpetrate his murder by poison? I have said this much to no one. The Judgment Day will reveal it. In my own case I have always believed that the poor Michigan who fired my house was employed at and sent from Cincinnati to do the burning. Money has become potential for mischief ever since 1860. Its potentiality for the purpose of gratifying the malignity and stimulating the latent revenge of a devil incarnate is unquestioned. I may be mistaken. Time may not reveal it. Eternity will.

I, in company with Mrs. Swan, went one morning to Gray Cemetery where Crozier was buried. We planted some evergreens on his lonely grave. May angels guard his quiet resting place till the morning of the Resurrection.

I found a great change at Knoxville. Its commerce, its manufactures, its business had increased with its increasing population. Also a great change in its society which I had known intimately *ab urbe condita*. Its *unity* was gone. Its people were less homogeneous, perhaps was more heterogeneous. There was an undercurrent of discordant material, antagonisms were visible everywhere and in all pursuits—rivalries, jealousies, no fraternizations. There was less hospitality, less of the generous emotions and manly passions, more of the sordid love of money, less culture, much less refinement, a more vulgar taste. Less evangelical piety—more religious pretension. Less patriotism and, of course, more selfishness. Less of learning and, of course, more of pedantry. Less deference for age, character and worth and more boastful effrontery and upstart consequence. The people were ruder and

coarser, less gentle, less amiable. Fewer gentlemen of the olden time—and vastly more parvenus and upstarts. Less of real respectability and more of the would-if-I-could. Yet there were elements at work in the material of society in Knoxville that may amalgamate and harmonize the antagonistic principles so as to produce in time symmetry and order and beauty. There are some model gentlemen, some model families that probably cannot be absorbed by the surrounding contact with the ignoble, the licentious, and the vulgar. Chemical affinities have much to do in the formation and growth of good society and its usages. For instance, if the low passion for money could, by any chemical process, be cultivated into an enlarged public spirit and thus come up to the dimension and proportion of a lofty patriotism, money may become the pabulum for the nourishment and support of the public good.

With such convictions of the present of Knoxville and with some doubt as to its future I hesitated still further as to the judiciousness at my age of life of making it again my home.

After remaining in Tennessee nearly two months alternately at Riverside, Knoxville and Lenoir's I bade them all adieu and returned via Asheville and Morganton to my Exile's Retreat No. 3. Our daughter, Mrs. Dickson, and her two boys came with me. They had stood the brunt of adversity and of isolation from us for five years. Mrs. Dickson unaided and alone had managed her farm so well as not only to support her own family well, but was able by her domestic habits, her skill, industry and frugality to bear the expense of such a journey. We came by rail to Wolf Creek. Thence to Morganton by stages and thence by steam again to our house. This journey up the French Broad—the very route I had projected in 1828 and assisted in surveying in 1836—brought to mind the frequent travels on horseback which I had made in the incipiency of the great work of connecting the South and West by railroad. The visions of my youth were nearly realized. Old friends at Asheville and Morganton spoke of it to me in very complimentary terms. Arrived at home I found all well. Mrs. Dickson spent the summer at our Retreat and during her stay on more than one occasion my entire family, consisting now of only three sons, three daughters, our grandchildren, were often all with us at one time. To this there was one exception. Dr. Lenoir and his two motherless boys were at their home in Tennessee. Such unions are not often seen after such separations, such dangers and such adversities. Such a re-union may not take place again on earth. The Lord prepare us all for a glorious union

above—one where there will be no more separation, no more sorrow, no more affliction no more death: where those dear members of our flock who have gone before us to Heaven will be the first to welcome us there—a united family above!

Many men on arriving at the close of life, complain of all its pursuits and enjoyments having proven vanity and vexation of spirit; but to my mind this is just an intimation that the plan of their lives had been selfish, that they have missed the right method of doing good, and that they have sought for pleasure, not in the legitimate use but in foolish abuses of their faculties. I cannot conceive that the hour of death should cause the mind to feel, all acts of kindness done to others, all acts of beneficence to one's country, all exercises of devotion performed in a right spirit, all deeds of justice executed, all rays of knowledge disseminated, all deeds of humanity and patriotism during life as vain, unprofitable and unconsoling, even at the moment of leaving forever this sublunary scene.