

Margaret Jane Johns

(- 22 Nov 1854)

For the National Intelligencer

The late Margaret Jane Johns -- When death closes the labors of the wise and good it becomes our duty to give utterance to the expressions of friendship and affection, and contemplate the example which has been given us. The homage which all civilized and christian nationals pay to virtue and piety, to private worth and practical usefulness, is the noblest recompense which the living can pay to the dead.

On the morning of the 22d of November there died at Malvern, near Alexandria, (the residence of her husband,) the gifted and distinguished woman whose name stands at the head of this article. Few, in our day, have descended to the grave with profounder esteem or more venerated love, and none probably whose life and example present fitter subjects for contemplation, or whose memory deserved more honorable and affectionate commemoration.

It is in this view that the following brief obituary is given to the public. It is from the pen of one who knew the deceased long and intimately; who loved and admired her living, and now deeply feels and laments her irreparable loss.

Mrs. Jones was born at Annapolis, in the State of Maryland, and was the eldest daughter of Thomas Shaaff, an eminent physician and accomplished gentleman, then a resident of that city. He was twice married. By the first marriage he had five children, (two sons and three daughters). Many years ago he removed with his family to Georgetown, in the District of Columbia, where he died, and where his widow and one daughter now reside. By the second marriage he had only one child, a son, who died in early boyhood.

Of the early life of Jane Shaaff the author of this tribute to her memory has no personal knowledge, having only known her as a married woman. When she grew up and came into society she is said (and no doubt truly) by all her contemporaries to have possessed accomplishments and social virtues rarely to be met with in one of her years. To great beauty both of features and figure she united not only high mental powers, but that decision of character and sweetness of disposition and temper which afterwards characterized her through life, and rendered her one of the most interesting and captivating women that ever lived. That one as beautiful and accomplished should have been so greatly admired and courted, as it is well known she was, was to have been expected; but it seems she chose to remain single, and did not marry until entering the meridian of life. It was at that period that she was addressed and became the wife of the Rev. John Johns, then a resident minister of the Episcopal church in the diocese of Maryland, but a few years afterwards one of the Bishops of Virginia. He was widower with five children (three daughters and two sons) at the time of his marriage. In uniting herself under such circumstances with a minister of the Gospel she doubtless acted under the influence of strong affection and convictions of duty. Indeed, no one seems to have better understood or more justly appreciated than she did the heavy obligations which a minister incurred, and the claims which must necessarily be made upon him not only as a teacher of religion and virtue, but as a living example of his influence upon society at large. To unite her destiny with one who could live up to the standard was to make her happy; to do so with one below it was to embitter her life and render it wretched. Relying upon her own strength and power, and confident in her choice, with a heart filled with the warm spirit of Christianity and devoted affection, she determined to marry, and in sharing with her husband the responsibilities of his station endeavor to aid and support him in his holy calling. The result proved most fortunately that she had judged rightly and acted wisely.

This marriage, as might have been expected, was gratifying to the friends of each party; and during a period of more than seventeen years it proved to both a source of unchequered and increasing happiness; indeed, a happier couple probably never lived.

In taking charge as the stepmother of five children (at all times a difficult and onerous duty to most women of any age) it might have been supposed that one at her time of life would have found it not only difficult and embarrassing, but appalling. But it turned out far otherwise. Well fitted for the station she had chosen, she felt that she was equal to its duties, whatever the sacrifices should be that she might be called upon to make; and so it proved, for she became as devoted and remarkable a stepmother as she did a wife. By her good sense, prudence, and affection she soon possessed herself of the unbounded love and reverence of these children of her husband, not only when they were young, but at a period of life when they were fully able to appreciate her worth and the debt of gratitude they owed her. They seem, indeed, to have known no other mother, and have proven themselves entirely worthy of her love. And never was there more bitter anguish and sorrow felt than that evinced by them at their irreparable loss. This was the first great trial of her life.

Before her marriage, and indeed in her girlhood, it seems and became an early communicant in the Episcopal church. Hers, though was a high scale of piety. It was not the religion of observance and profession but of the heart and life.

... A purer and more single-hearted Christian under very religious obligation and every moral and social duty, probably never lived; and it is the highest praise of her life that she never ceased to adorn the purest doctrines of Christianity by the holiest practice. It is not surprising, then, that as a Christian wife, mother, sister, and friend she lived and died without reproach, and left behind her an example worthy to be followed by her whole sex.

Nor was she less distinguished and remarkable in general society, where both in single as well as married life she seems to have been one of its brightest ornaments. There she never indulged in irony or sarcasm, and rarely uttered an ill-natured word, because never influenced by an ill-natured feeling. Her heart seemed always full of clemency, dignity and love. Nor was there anything of levity or frivolity about her, though one of the most brightly-cheerful companions imaginable.

It is true that her manners had sometimes the appearance of coldness and restraint, which failed to impress strangers at first in her favor and caused them to feel diffident and shy in approaching her, and consequently not infrequently led to a wrong estimate of her true character and disposition. But once to know her, to be at ease with her, to see the transitions of intellectual expression which lit up her countenance, to hear the tones of her voice, and witness the sweetness and benignity of her smile, you became satisfied at once as to her real character and the power of her attractions. And, then, her self-control was so exemplary. She was so unassuming and self-possessed, and yet so decided, indeed, there was a frankness, and simplicity, and, good friend, and affectionate ardor, and elevation of soul, united with great moral dignity, that made her an object of interest and admiration to all who approached her. And hence it was that she possessed that rare power of reproof and admonition in such an eminent degree, but which was always exercised without giving pain or offence. Instead of leaving, as is too often the case, a sting in the bosoms of those reprov'd and admonish'd, they seemed to love and venerate her the more for it. But it was not in general or mixed society that she shone with the greatest lustre or to the most advantage; far otherwise. It was in the innermost circle of domestic life, in her own house and around her own hearth, surrounded by her husband and children and friends she loved best, that all the beauties of her mind and the charms of her nature could be properly felt and appreciated. It was there that her virtues and superiority, the wisdom of her counsels, the sweetness of her disposition, and the benevolence which beamed in her bright and intelligent face, and marked every sentiment that dripped from her lips, were most strongly and deeply felt. And thus it should ever be; for who does not know and feel that it is in these private and endearing relations of home that the best of affections, and the warmest sympathies of our nature are only to be found? And then her tastes and amusements, as

might well be supposed, were of the most refined character. From early life she was devoted to books and literary pursuits. She had great fondness for poetry and flowers, and the keenest relish, nay love, for the beauties of nature. The country, therefore, was the great field of her enjoyments, and it was in beautifying and adorning her new home at Malvern that she probably first impaired her health. In this she was not unlike her near kinsman, the late Frank Rey, whom in many traits of character she strongly resembled and for whom she had the deepest love and veneration. Indeed, from the days of her childhood to the period of his death, she was one of his greatest favorites and most cherished companions; and it was to him doubtless she was largely indebted for many of those intellectual, religious, and social accomplishments for which she was so distinguished.

But we are admonished by the length of this article to forbear and bring it to a close. Her deathbed seems to have been in keeping with her life, and affords a fit subject for contemplation. It was strikingly awful and impressive. Of the immediate cause of her death nothing is certainly known. She had suffered with an affection of the heart which in its consequences more than probable caused her death. Although she had been confined to her house for a few weeks before her death, it came most suddenly and unexpectedly upon her family and friends. They apprehended no danger until a few hours before she died. She alone seems to have felt and known that her end was rapidly approaching. She retained her faculties to the moment of her death. In speaking to her husband and children a short time before she expired there was a calmness and mildness in her tones of voice (ever soft and low) and a gentleness in her manner, that one might almost have fancied there was a halo around her head which gave warning of what was coming; and so it proved. That she suffered more than she evinced is more than probable; but throughout her illness she uttered no complaints, expressed no fears, but was calm, patient, and directed. She beheld, therefore, the approach of death without terror or alarm, supported by the conviction

"That the dread path once trod,
Heaven would lift its everlasting portals high,
And bid the pure in heart behold their God."

The last words she uttered were to ask that her head might be raised from the pillow, and in the act of doing so it was found that her heart had yielded and all was hushed, and her glorious spirit gone to eternal rest with God.

That she felt deeply the separation which was about to take place from all she loved best on earth there can be but little doubt; but the hope that gave her comfort and strength to the last moment was that in another and better state of existence the golden links of that chain which had bound her so long to earthly happiness and was so soon to be broken would again be united and rendered eternal.

She left an only child, a noble boy, who had been the idol of her heart, and from whom she had never been separated a day and night. Oh! how her heart turned upon him in the midst of death! Among her last requests she asked that he might be committed to the care and guidance of her two single and lovely daughters, with the dying injunction that if he lived they would bring him up a christian.

Such was the being whose character and virtues we have attempted to sketch and who has gone down to the grave amidst the tears and benedictions of a whole community, and of whom it may with truth be said that if ever there was a woman formed to conciliate the affections and secure the esteem of the wise and good, that woman as Margaret Jane Johns.

She is interred in the Congressional Grave yard near Washington city. It was a dark and stormy day when her remains were borne to the last resting place and laid by the side of her father and brother. There was no ostentatious parade about her funeral, but her remains were attended by those relatives and friends who best loved her living, and mourned her death the most deeply.

Of her bereaved and devoted husband we forbear to speak. His sorrow can receive no aid from earthly counsels. He knows and feels that

" Nature hath assigned
Two sovereign remedies for human grief;
Religion, surest, firmest, first, and best,
And strenuous action next."
Virginia, December 25, 1854