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REAR-ADMIRAL

CHARLES HENRY DAVIS,

UNITED STATES NAVY.



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REAR-ADMIRAL

CHARLES HENRY DAVIS.

[From "The Nation."]

In the late Admiral CHARLES HENRY DAVIS the navy has lost one who was remarkable for being at the same time an active naval officer, devoted to his profession, and a distinguished promoter of science in his country. He was born in Massachusetts in 1807, and entered Harvard College in 1821; but he soon showed a leaning toward a more active life than that of a student, and, at the end of two years, left college and entered the navy as a midshipman. The first ten years of his naval life were spent in the usual cruises of a young officer, and made him better known for the generosity and impulsiveness of his disposition than for a promise of becoming eminent in the intellectual world. But he now resumed his mathematical and classical studies, a strong impulse toward the former being given by his acquaintance with Professor Peirce, whom he was always proud to claim as his teacher. In 1842 he was appointed to duty on the Coast Survey, and at once began a series of observations and researches which made him known as one of the most accomplished hydrographers the Government service has produced. His field of duty was principally on the coast between New York and Boston; where, among many other things, he located the well-known shoals which bear his name. The results of his

researches during the seven years of his connection with the Coast Survey were embodied in a series of papers relating to the action of tidal and other currents in harbors, the Gulf Stream, and other allied subjects, which appeared in the Memoirs of the Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge, and the Coast-Survey Reports. He now very naturally became a member of the more important commissions for improving the harbors of the coast, whether under the General or State Governments. He continued to be frequently employed in duties of a hydrographic character up to the time of his death; his last service of the kind being as member of the commission organized last autumn to report what navy-yards could be dispensed with. In 1849 Congress provided for the preparation of an American nautical almanac, and Lieutenant Davis was at once charged with the work. The office was established at Cambridge, because it was more easy to command the mathematical skill and the published material for such a work at the seat of Harvard University than elsewhere. The policy adopted in the newly-formed office, though not in all respects to be permanently imitated as a piece of administrative machinery, was such as to make it a more efficient promoter of mathematical astronomy in this country than any organization we have ever had. Young men of talent were looked for from all quarters, were employed without regard to personal or political influence, were paid according to their efficiency, and were encouraged to engage in any branch of mathematical or astronomical research which would tend to improve the almanac. In the work of the office there was a freedom from discipline and restraint which, though it might work badly under other circumstances, was very favorable to the development of a school of mathematicians. Besides men like Peirce and Walker, who had attained eminence before becoming connected with his office, the names of President Runkle, Professors Winlock and Newcomb, Chauncey Wright and William Ferrel may be cited

as representatives of the men who were first brought out through their connection with the *Nautical Almanac*.

With the exception of a cruise in the Pacific, which took him away for three years, Davis remained in charge of the *Almanac* until the outbreak of the rebellion. His hydrographic knowledge was then too valuable to be dispensed with in organizing the blockade of the Southern ports and the plans of naval attack. He was fleet-captain of the expedition which, under Dupont, fought the battle of Port Royal, and gave the Government the first foothold which it gained in South Carolina after the fall of Sumter. In 1862 he succeeded Foote in command of the Mississippi flotilla. In two severe battles, and several smaller ones, he completed the destruction of the rebel naval power on the Mississippi and its tributaries, captured Memphis, and met Farragut at Vicksburg. In 1863 he received the thanks of Congress for his military services, was promoted to the grade of rear-admiral, and made chief of the new Bureau of Navigation in the Navy Department, which had been organized on his recommendation. In 1865 he was made Superintendent of the Naval Observatory, but two years afterward was detached and placed in command of the Brazilian Squadron. Here the Paraguayan war involved him in a dispute with the diplomatic authorities, represented by Mr. James Watson Webb, in which he was subjected to much criticism by the press and in Congress. But he was fully sustained by the naval authorities, who best understood the restrictions under which he was compelled to act. In 1874 he was once more appointed Superintendent of the Observatory, and took an active part in fitting out the expeditions to observe the transit of Venus. This office he still filled at the time of his death. Notwithstanding the active and prominent life which Admiral Davis led, and his energy and dash as a naval commander, his tastes, especially in his later years, were much more those of the refined gentleman of literary leisure than of the active man of the world. He was little inclined to mingle

in general society, but rather sought that of the cultivated few whose tastes were congenial with his own. His relations with the men of science who were his official subordinates were singularly free from those complaints, jealousies, and distrusts which so often arise when military men are placed in charge of works of a purely scientific character. This arose from an entire absence of every trace of jealousy in his nature, combined with an admiration of intellectual superiority in others which led him to concede every thing to it. He combined independence of character with Christian courtesy in a way that made him a model to the young men by whom he was surrounded. No human being who ever came into his presence was too lowly to be addressed with the most kindly courtesy, and when arrogance or impertinence became insufferable no respect for position or influence gloved the hand which dealt the blow.

[From "*The Boston Daily Advertiser.*"]

A brief sketch of Admiral Davis's public life and services has already appeared in the columns of the Advertiser. But it is not fitting that one so widely known and so truly honored and beloved in this community should pass away without some expression of the appreciation with which his personal qualities were regarded. His intellect was lively, vigorous, and able, and he delighted in the works of intellect. In his youth he was enthusiastically fond of music and of all the arts and accomplishments; and he was always a great lover of literature, and familiar with the chief masterpieces of modern poetry and fiction. Shakspeare, especially, he had at his tongue's end, and his knowledge of it was not a mere verbal memory, such as we often find, but he was penetrated with ideas drawn from that storehouse of wisdom of the mind and heart. His conversation was forcible, full of good sense, and most amusing. He brought to bear on any subject he took up a host of

argument, illustration, and elucidation, and he liked to brighten up the driest discussion of professional and scientific matters with his original and vivid turns of expression, or with some apt and unhackneyed quotation. Miss Martineau, whom he saw a good deal during her visit to America, declared him the most agreeable talker whom she met in this country; and he was at that time, of course, a young man. To the scientific works which occupied a considerable part of his professional career, he brought a high order of judgment, knowledge, and ability, and a devotion of time and energy which was of the purest pattern. His discovery of certain dangerous shoals lying directly in the track of a ship when sailing between New York and Europe, was among the early triumphs of the Coast Survey, and did much to create public confidence in the value of that work. The plan which he adopted for the first volume of the Nautical Almanac gave it at once a distinguished place among publications of its class, and has been retained, with little change, to the present day; and the Almanac, under his superintendency, fulfilled a function of high value in fostering and bringing to light the mathematical genius of the United States. His administration of the Naval Observatory has been conducted with eminent credit. He has also rendered important services to the country as a member of various advisory boards and commissions. It was, however, in strictly professional work that he found his most congenial sphere of labor. He was proud of the service, and had his heart in it. He was an admirable officer. He had the true spirit of command, strong, dignified, and quiet; and one that, not needing artificial support, was accompanied by a thoroughly friendly relation to his officers and men. He bore an important part in the brilliant capture of Port Royal, and his subsequent services in command of the Mississippi flotilla earned him the thanks of Congress.

But that which is felt most deeply now by those who knew Admiral Davis well is the loss of a man of rare and

noble character. He was a charming companion, abounding to the last in a natural freshness and gayety of spirit; and he had one of the most honorable, upright, true, generous, and gentle hearts that ever beat. He was a man of marked courage, and had, eminently, the courage of his convictions. At the same time he was distinguished by perfect courtesy, having but one standard of manners, — and that a finished but unaffected standard, — for all classes of men. The humblest person never failed to receive from him, not only kindness, but the same animated, genial, and sincere politeness in which his nature habitually expressed itself to all the world. He bore good-will to every one, and was always in a cordial vein. Meanness, trickery, and malice, indeed, roused his bitter contempt. But a salient characteristic of at least his later years was his profound trust in human nature, his complete freedom from cynicism, and his faith in the power of right and truth to conquer both the world and the individual conscience. He

Still in his right hand carried gentle peace
To silence envious tongues.

He would meet the most glaring falsehood or misdeed in the tone of pitying remonstrance, rather than of anger; and for those he loved he had a confidence that never raised a question, a delightful and tender sympathy in pleasure and in grief, and a strong, cheerful, and unfailing helpfulness. There was much in him to recall Thackeray's character of Colonel Newcome; but his brilliancy of mind and wide knowledge of the world gave him a better judgment of men and a more commanding influence on others' judgment than this comparison may perhaps indicate. We may say of him, as it was said of Sir Launcelot, he was "the kindest man that ever struck with sword."

To a large circle of near and distant friends, an element of brightness has vanished from the world. But their feeling will at last become that which alone his cheerful spirit

would desire, — one of gladness in the memory of so fine, so true, and so sunny a nature. It has enriched the lives of all who were familiar with it; and it teaches them a still enduring lesson in the example of one who, having known the world, believed in it with youthful freshness of faith, and, having had his experience of disappointment, and of detraction, and of

The spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,

and having tasted sorrow, bore in his bosom a joyous and mirthful heart, and reflected back to heaven the sunshine of the skies.

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