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The Late Lucian Minor

Editors of the Southern Literary Messenger

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Brief editorials and brief obituaries in the newspapers of the State, have already apprized the public of the death, on the 8th of July last, at Williamsburg, of Lucian Minor, Professor of Law in William and Mary College. These announcements sufficed to inflict a pang of sorrow upon a large number of devoted friends, and were, in their simple brevity, just what his own taste would have approved. But the death of such a man would seem to require a more extended notice. In essaying it, the writer seeks, not the somewhat selfish gratification of indulging in deserved eulogy of a departed friend. His aim is higher. He trusts that the exhibition of genius, talents, taste and learning devoted less to the worldly advancement of their possessor, than to the good of mankind, may carry with it a salutary lesson. A cordial intimacy and uninterrupted friendship coeval with his acquaintance, and extending through a period embracing more than half his earthly career, in some degree, qualify the writer for the task. No one has enjoyed better opportunities of knowing and appreciating the traits of his moral and intellectual nature.

After completing his education in the venerable institution of which he died a Professor, Mr. Minor removed to Alabama, with a view of following his profession in that State. His sojourn there was a brief one, and he returned to Virginia, and commenced the practice of the Law, in his native county of Louisa, where he resided, with the exception of a year or two spent in Albemarle, until his appointment to the Chair of Law in William and Mary.

As a Lawyer, Mr. Minor was justly held in very high estimation by all of his brethren who had opportunity to become acquainted with the extent and accuracy of his learning. While he regarded the Common Law, in its harsher features, with disfavor, as a relic of a semi-civilization, and was an earnest and eloquent advocate of such reforms as he thought were demanded by the progress of society—his criticisms were discriminating, and displayed a profound familiarity with the ancient sources of jurisprudence and the whole line of judicial exposition by which it has been developed. His learning was the comprehensive learning of a jurisconsult, not the case knowledge of a mere attorney. The Revisors of the Code of Virginia (1849) were not unwilling to receive the assistance of his pen in the preparations of portions of that work. His success at the bar was moderate, in comparison with his legal attainments. A result due, in part, perhaps, to qualities which made him the more estimable as a man—the utter absence of all arts of popularity, and a stern adherence to his own lofty sense of right—in part, to a style of argument in the conduct of causes, better suited to an appellate, than a nisi prius, tribunal. His peculiar professional qualifications had found, in the pursuits in which he was engaged at the time of his death, their most appropriate and useful sphere—legal authorship and the professor’s chair.

Mr. Minor was a fine classical scholar. He had been taught in the good old way, and cultivated the Greek and Latin not as affording the materials of mere philosophical speculation and verbal analysis, but as keys to a noble domain of thought, taste and feeling. He was deeply imbued with the spirit of Greek and Roman literature. It moulded his style and modes of thinking. Unlike most men of the present day, he did not discard these studies as the cares of life pressed upon him. When most actively engaged in the practice of his profession, it seemed a point of conscience to read daily a page or two of some favorite classic author. With our own literature his acquaintance was varied and profound. He had drunk deep “of the pure well of English undefiled,” and his taste was refined even to the point, occasionally, of fastidiousness. His reading was multifarious and discursive—though the accuracy of his information might have led you to believe that he was “the man of one book.” These almost encyclopedic stores of literary knowledge were never obtrusively para-

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were inadvertently, in choice quotation, apt allusion and felicitous illustration. Nor were his acquisitions an undigested mass of the thoughts and words of others. What he read was assimilated and became part and parcel of his mental being—the stimulus and material of intellectual activity, not a substitute for thought. You saw that the stream of literature had passed over his mind by the fertility it had imparted. It was the cause of regret to many of his friends that he did not devote himself to letters as a career. His success would have been certain and decided. In the midst of the harrassing cares of a county court practitioner, he contributed freely to the periodical press. With a full mind, ardent feelings and great command of language, we need hardly say that he wrote with remarkable facility. Composition seemed to cost him nothing more than the manual labor of committing his thoughts to paper. All the productions of his pen are characterised by a terse and elegant precision of style—unadulterated English—perpsectivity of thought, and, we need scarcely say, the loftiest moral tone. At one time, he had in view the publication of a volume of miscellanies, and we hope his family may carry into effect his intention. It was the privilege of the writer to maintain with him, for many years, an active correspondence, and from the multitude of letters in his possession a selection might be made far more worthy of the press, than most of those which form the staple of modern biography. His epistolary style was singularly delightful. Literary criticism—moral reflection—political disposition—the passing news—or family incidents—whatever may have been the topic—was conveyed in language simple and unaffected, which flowed, as it were, spontaneously, from his facile pen; inducing the belief that the terse beauty of the expression was the result—not of artistic skill, but,—of careless grace.

Benevolence—in the most comprehensive sense of the term—was a prominent trait in the character of Mr. Minor. He loved his fellow-men, and strove to promote their welfare by every means in his power. The feeling did not evaporate in the contemplation of vague schemes of impracticable philanthropy, whilst suffering which daily met his eye was neglected. It was a living, active principle. We shall not be guilty of the indelicacy of trumpeting his deeds of charity, performed in the quietest and least ostentatious way—of his services, however, in one important field of philanthropic effort, which may be called, his specialty, we may be permitted to speak more freely. We mean the cause of Temperance. To this he devoted, for the last twelve or fifteen years, the best energies of his head and heart. His ready pen found abundant employment in portraying the evils of intemperance, and in pointing out and urging the adoption of the only remedy. His reputation as a writer opened to him the columns of newspapers, closed, generally, to the discussion of the subject. His rich stores of knowledge and the graces of his style, insured the perusal of his communications, and thus access was had to a class of readers before ignorant of statistics and arguments, which could neither be denied nor refuted. The influence thus quietly exerted upon the public mind is not to be estimated. His facts were so incontestible—his arguments so logical—his appeals so persuasive—and so profound and general the confidence in the sincerity of his convictions, and the purity of his motives—that his essays rarely failed to neutralize hostility where they failed to convert. Under the auspices of the State organization of the Sons of Temperance, a very large edition was published of a tract from his pen, called "Reasons for Abolishing the Liquor Traffic," which, it is generally admitted, is by far the ablest production on the subject which has any where appeared.

Nor were his labors in the cause confined to the pen. For many years, to the detriment, perhaps, of his private interests and professional prospects, he was the fearless and eloquent advocate of Temperance before the people. He was not what is usually called an orator. But he spoke, fluently, sensibly, and, as in his writings, poured forth the riches of his
knowledge in the choicest language. His quiet enthusiasm—his unselfish zeal—supported by an array of facts and close arguments, seldom failed to captivate his hearers; and numerous are the instances of those, who "came to scoff," becoming active co-laborers. With the exception, perhaps, of that of his noble-hearted friend, who for years sustained him in his labors by his counsel and sympathy, and who cheered by his presence his dying bed—the venerable philanthropist of Bromo—the name of Lucian Minor was earliest and most prominently identified with the cause of Temperance in Virginia.

We might dwell upon the many virtues which adorned his character. His unspotted integrity—his scrupulous regard for truth—the fidelity with which he discharged every trust. It would be pleasing to contemplate him as a son—a brother—a husband—a father, in each of which relations the language of sober truth might sound like adulation. But we forbear.

Of his religious character we must say something. Without examination or reflection, he had adopted much of the insidious scepticism of Gibbon and Hume, whose bold assumptions and misstatements tended to embarrass him, even after he was satisfied of their fallacy. Content with the exemplary discharge of his duty to his fellow-man, he lived in the practical neglect of his obligations to God. The inconsistencies of the professors of Christianity, constituted the chief refuge of his conscience, when pressed upon the subject, and he was wont to insist upon Pope's delusive sentiment:—

"For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight,
His can't be wrong, whose life is in the right."

When, in his latter years, this crust of indifference was broken through and he began to investigate the claims of the Bible, his progress was slow. He relinquished his long cherished prejudices, not without violent resistance, and his concessions were not unfrequently accompanied by a declaration of his utter disbelief of some further truth, which, however, he was in turn obliged to accept. "I believe," he said to a friend, "much more than I ever thought I should." Addison's remarkable illustration of the relative importance of time and eternity contained in No. 575 of the Spectator, wrought strongly on his mind and seemed to stimulate him to enquiry; but it is worthy of observation, that, whilst he read with satisfaction and profit such books as Melvaine's Evidences, The Philosophy of the Plan of Salvation, and The Christ of History, it was not until he became a more diligent and prayerful reader of the text of the Scriptures, that the light of divine truth broke irresistibly upon his mind.

Convinced, at length, by the enlightening Spirit of God, accompanying His Word, of his own sin, of the perfect righteousness of Jehovah and of the awful judgment to come, he hastened, in earnest, to seek, and soon found refuge in that atonement which before he had rejected. His humility and faith grew together. The more firmly he trusted that by free grace he was become a child of God, the more humble was he before Him who had so distinguished him by His unmerited love. The gloom which had long oppressed him vanished before the glorious sunlight of these new-found and immortal hopes, and the last two months of his earthly life, with all the drawbacks of a distressing disease, and absence from family and friends, seemed the happiest of his existence. Prayer and praise were his habitual employments during this period, and he delighted to converse upon those sublime truths which he had come to appreciate as infinitely above all that human philosophy could teach, and which imparted to him, even in his last moments of consciousness, that peace of God which passeth all understanding.