GEORGE JOHNSON

Although he has been in his grave for six years, it was not until last August that I really learned to know him. It is not strange that I did not understand him quite as well as my older brothers and sisters did. He was not home long enough at a time to give opportunity for great understanding. Of course I thought I knew him, this tall broad shouldered man whose curly brown hair was thinning on top of his head. At least I assumed all the prerogatives of close friendship. I gave him slippery kisses when he started on the many trips all over the country which his work demanded. I was the first to brazenly challenge his bulging suitcase with "What did you bring me?" when he returned. It was I who demanded chocolate sodas of him on hot summer evenings. And when he was away I missed the friendly teasing that enlivened the hours he spent at home. Altogether he was a most agreeable person to live with and call "daddy". Still I did not know him, for there was so much about him that was puzzling.

For example, why did he insist that the entire family arise at seven-thirty on Sunday morning and to go Sunday School at nine. Evelyn's family lay abed as late as they wanted to on Sunday morning. Evelyn's father said he could be just as good if he read the magazine section of the paper in bed as he could by going to church and hearing some preacher tell him he was sinner. Why did our family gather for family worship every evening before anyone went out? None of my friends had to sit still while someone read a short scripture passage and her father read a brief prayer. I knew Dad was a minister, but why did minister's families have to do that? I much preferred saying the Lord's Prayer in unison on these occasions, for it was short, but Dad observed once that "Maybe God gets tired of hearing the Lord's Prayer all the time." I wondered, too, why he subscribed to and read children's' magazines to me before I was able to read, and bought me as many books as I could read when I did know how, why he taught me songs of "Sunday schools in China, India and Japan" during the evening in sessions on his knee, why any missionary that came to our church to talk made our home his stopping place, or why so many of the books in his library had titles such as "The Uplift of China", "Men and Missions" or "The life of David Livingstone"?

Since a day last August, however, I think I have learned to know him better. On that day, I was cleaning a large storage closet, and incidentally investigating everything I found. In a tin box I discovered a thin sheaf of typed papers and a bundle of letters. The papers were labeled "Personal Memoirs" and the letters were the yellow with age kind, and tied with the traditional blue ribbon. Which would you read first? I would too, and I did. This is what the letters and memoirs revealed.

He was born during the dark days of the Civil War, Dec. 7, 1861. Only one of, my brother, has seen the old house in New York's east side where he spent his first years. His father Joseph Johnson and his mother, Friedericka Geiger, both of whom had come to America in 1853, were native Germans. His father had fought in the war of 1848 and was

among the troops sent into the Schleswig Holstine. He soon wearied of German militarism, however, and decided to do as so many others were doing, come to the United States. In New York he met Fredericka and soon were married.

By the time the Civil War came, the couple had four children, two boys and two girls. Nevertheless, my grandfather having secured his citizenship papers, responded to the war fever in his Teutonic blood, and when Lincoln's call for seventy-five thousand men was heard, enlisted in Company 1 of the Eighth New York Infantry. During those days of upheaval my grandmother, alone in New York with her little brood, of which my father was the youngest, suffered indescribably from hard work and anxiety. Mobs of riots held sway, making it necessary for everyone to have their belongings packed and ready to flee at anytime. Then too, when his first term had expired, grandfather re-enlisted and served until the end. But when the struggle finally came to a close, the family left the growing metropolis and moved to Ironton, a mining town in Pennsylvania.

They stayed in Ironton until the panic of 1873, made the state of Michigan, where grandfather had two brothers, seem most attractive. The family had increased by four by this time (not so large in those days) and my father had to contribute to the small income by working in the iron mines, a very unhealthy occupation for a boy of fifteen. This made school a side issue and only four months of the year were spent there.

But when they had moved to Michigan, even the four months were denied. There was work on the farm in summer, and in the woods in winter. There was the traditional log cabin, with the time honored chinks through which snow drifted, to be built, although no future president was to live there. Father spent a good deal of his time reading, for books were fascinating. He probably read Pilgrim's Progress, the Bible and all those books which any self-respecting resident of a log cabin reads, but he himself admits that "of course the selections were not always fortunate."

He soon began to attend a little church at Leighton, Michigan, where the young people of the community met. It was a different denominations, however, for his parents were staunch Lutherans, so of course, he met opposition at home. But he kept up his religious activities, for at the little church he had met Hannah Weber, the pretty daughter of a prosperous farmer. And when he was with Hannah the whole Lutheran church could not prevail against him. The little church also appealed more than any other religious organization had before that time, and in it's warm and friendly circle he began to dream of entering the ministry. His meager education and the seeming impossibility of securing more made such a dream seem impossible. As I read that part of his little story of himself, I realized why his children had always been encouraged to take any educational opportunities within their reach. But he could not forgo his hopes, and finally had saved enough money to take him to Naperville, Illinois where little Northwestern College and the Theological Seminary were. He had no very clear idea of what he was going to do when he arrive, but he was on his way.

I like to imagine how countrified he looked and felt when he reached the school. He says "I had no adequate idea of what I needed and no one to consult as to the best course to pursue. The few dollars which I had saved up for the occasion were soon spent and I was going into debt, for my studies did not allow much time for outside work. My stay at school was brief, but profitable. I learned to realize the greatness of the task before me and the inadequacy of my preparations for it. My clothes were poor and without an overcoat I soon realized I must do something else." So he went back defeated.

The church at home, however, had recommended him for the ministry, and the Michigan Conference needed young ministers even if they were minus a D. D. Therefore, when the conference met for it's session in 1884, the Bishop granted him a license to preach and immediately assigned him a country circuit, whose stations were several miles apart. So the young man, only twenty-three, began a strenuous program of three sermons each Sabbath. He found a home with one of his most faithful parishioners, "Uncle Johnny" Cook and his wife, and regularly drove his circuit with a mouse colored pony and an open buggy. He says "It was surely not profound preaching which prompted people to come to church, but rather the fire and zeal of youth. However they felt about it, they came, which fact was most encouraging." My mother says she could easily understand why many a country miss suddenly "got religion" I those days. The next year he was transferred to the town of Petoskey in Northern Michigan.

Meanwhile he had not forgotten the brown haired girl in Leighton. Before he went to Petoskey he asked her if she loved him, and had received an answer very much in the affirmative. So they became engaged but told no one, even her parents. Of course from that time on letters went regularly back and forth between Leighton and Petoskey, and these were the letters I found last summer and shamelessly read.

The letters revealed an unfulfilled ambition that his memoirs did not record. While at Petoskey he was asked if he could go to Japan as a missionary. Missionary enterprises always interested him, and the romance and glamour surrounding such projects in those days were attractive, so of course he wanted to go. He wrote eagerly to Hannah urging her to consent to the scheme. But the answering letter said that her parents would refuse to let her go on such a dangerous undertaking, but she didn't want to stand in his way. His letter in reply said that he had refused on the grounds of inadequate preparedness. All his life he had that dream, though, and he said many times, "If I were twenty years younger, I would go as a missionary."

Some of the letters relate incidents that though almost tragic then, are amusing now. Hannah had a rival in the person of Liddy, a local belle who had succumbed to the charms of the young man with the reddish brown curly hair, and grey blue eyes. Hannah was frankly worried about her rival's influence on her lover, and about what the neighbor said, for of course the engagement was still a secret. Only constant repetitions that "Liddy doesn't mean a thing to me" could allay her fears. On another occasion he had two boils on the back of his neck, and in those days of stiff collars they were no laughing matter. When he had written

about them, the answer came plaintively back that “she wished she could have those horrid boils, for she didn’t have a thing to do and he was so busy.”

Finally their engagement was announced. Her parents were pleased, but his father objected to a slight extent, because she was not Lutheran. But then, since his son had renounced his former creed, a daughter-in-law who was not of that creed must be accepted with resignation.

They were married on April 19, 1886. Life was for ten years just a succession of moves from church to church. During this time four children were born, three girls and a boy, who died at the age of three.

But in 1896 he was unexpectedly asked to take the position of treasurer and financial agent of the same college where he had made a brief stay. He accepted, and the family moved to Naperville, which is about twenty miles west of Chicago. It was here that my two older brothers came on the scene and spent their early years. It is a lovely little place, where all life centers about the college. At that time there was not even a “movie” theater, and the widest diversions consisted of walking through the tiny park or walking to the railroad station to see the midnight express go thundering through on it’s way to Chicago. But according to my brothers and sisters it was little short of heaven.

In January 1908 I arrived, and three months later the general conference appointed Dad to a better position in Cleveland. He was to head the missionary work of the denomination, a work which more than any other interested him. So after twelve years in Naperville, the moving van again stopped at our door.

In Cleveland the years went happily. Father was absorbed in his work, my sisters in beaus, and finally in homes of their own; mother in the family, and the rest of us in school. But Dad’s absorption in his work slowly undermined the stalwartness of him. Doctor’s orders to go to California or up to the Great Lakes were defied on the grounds that “we are so busy at the office.”

In 1919 stomach disorders began to oppress him. An x-ray discovered the dread disease, cancer. He was ordered immediately to go to the famous Mayo brothers in Minnesota for treatment, and finally he obeyed. But the operation performed by the great surgeon only prolonged his life through one bittersweet year of getting ready for the end. He realized too late that the work could spare him, and could go on without him. We watched the awful disease take it’s course on this man who had never been ill, while he wished serenely that “I could wake up over there tomorrow morning.” On February 1, 1920, the day after my twelfth birthday, the malady proclaimed it’s victory.

Doris Johnson
April 19, 1926
(18 at this time)