

## The Youth of Old Age

In his eighty-ninth year, in 1934, Johnson Brigham published *The Youth of Old Age*, his last book. A glance through its pages makes one wonder when or if Johnson Brigham ever became old in spirit. Two weeks before his death he was invited to contribute an article to the *Iowa State Register*. At the age of eighty, in 1926, he and Mrs. Brigham took a trip around the world, stopping at Mukden, Manchuria, to visit their elder daughter, Ida Brigham Storms. Three years later the Brighams made a second visit to China.

*The Youth of Old Age* contains much of the author's philosophy of life. It is a brave book, a wholesome one for old and young to read. In his Preface he said that he was grateful for a competence that made him fully independent and for good eyesight that enabled him to continue his reading and rereading of a vast number of books. After the death of his wife he had spent hours in search of items that would confirm his belief in the possible youthfulness of old age. These he had collected into a compendium, adding in a chatty and individual manner sometimes a personal and sometimes a philosophical comment. Reviewers referred to him as "the youthful octogenarian."



The death of his wife, Lucy, in 1930, brought to an end nearly forty years of ideal companionship in marriage. A few years later both his daughter, Ida Brigham Storms, and her son Robert died at Mukden, Manchuria. His other daughter, Mary Brigham, had married J. Marshall Johnson, an army man, and lived in many places in the United States, but always kept in close touch with her parents.

In spite of the loneliness of Johnson Brigham's last years, his friends commented upon his serenity of mind, a quality which he had apparently cultivated throughout his life. He had acquired the ability to encounter sorrow and to bury it deeply within himself, remaining outwardly serene and mentally alert.

This quality is evident throughout *The Youth of Old Age* and is seen in both his choice of selections and in his reflections. There is a note of delightful irony apparent in the book. In 1905, at the age of fifty-nine, he had entitled his tribute to his wife, *An Old Man's Idyl*; but at the age of eighty-eight he repeatedly declared that life began at seventy.

Johnson Brigham had always possessed the faculty of making and holding friends. His work on the Cedar Rapids *Republican* had brought him into contact with Richard Clarkson of the *Register*; later he counted among his close friends Gardner Cowles and Harvey Ingham. His active



membership in the Iowa Press and Authors' Club, of which he was twice president, enabled him to continue his close touch with the editors and the writers of Iowa. A member of the Unitarian Church since 1900, he served as president of the Unitarian League, and at one time was president of the State Unitarian Association.

In addition to his historical and literary interests he kept in touch with the businessmen of Des Moines through directorships in various banks and insurance companies; for a time he served as vice-president of the Waterbury Chemical Company. He participated actively in the Grant, the Prairie, and the Bankers' clubs.

On his eightieth birthday, on March 11, 1926, Mr. and Mrs. Gardner Cowles honored Johnson Brigham with a dinner given at the Wakonda Club for 250 invited guests. His work as librarian, citizen, and leader was lauded by James B. Weaver, Lewis Worthington Smith, and Mrs. Alice Weitz. Harvey Ingham closed the program with a toast entitled "The High Lights of Eighty Years."

Ten years later the Des Moines Library Club planned an honorary dinner to celebrate the State Librarian's ninetieth birthday. Because of illness the guest of honor could only listen over the radio. At the banquet, in her toast to "Johnson Brigham, Ninety Years Young," Mrs. Alice Weitz said:

The glory of a man's life lies not in the scarcity of his



enemies but in the quality of his friends. . . . I offer this toast to his grace of mind, his love of his friends, his tolerance of those who disagree with him, his elegance of taste, his courageous philosophy, his unmatched conversational powers, and his greatness of heart.

Seven months later, on October 9, 1936, the end came. Though his health had been failing, there was no prolonged illness. Three days later he was buried at Cedar Rapids in the Oak Hill Cemetery beside his wife.

The Cedar Rapids *Gazette* carried the following words: "The State of Iowa owes much to Johnson Brigham for the preservation of its history. . . . Brigham, however, was more than a historian, for he was influential in molding the activities of his adopted state." The editor might have added the words of Samuel Johnson when he paid his final tribute to his friend, Oliver Goldsmith: "he adorned whatever he touched."

LUELLA M. WRIGHT