REMINISCENCES OF GENERAL ROBERT E. LEE,
1865-68
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MY MEMORY of General Lee during the closing scenes
of the War between the States centers about an incident
in the home occupied by his family on Franklin Street, Rich-
mond, Virginia, which city was the Confederate Capital. It
was a winter’s afternoon in March, 1865, about two months
before the end. The General had come over from Petersburg
for a conference and, having finished it, had dined with his
family—a rare pleasure in those doubtful days. Custis Lee,
his oldest son, an aide to President Jefferson Davis, had
also been present at the meal, which I, as a nephew of
the family, a private in the cadet corps, had been invited to share.
Mrs. Lee, who was an invalid, had not appeared at the table,
and the daughters of the family had left us. Custis was
sitting by the fire, smoking a cigar and reading a newspaper.
The General was walking the floor, up and down, up and
down. He was so much engrossed in his own thoughts, with
his eyes fixed on the floor, that he seemed to be oblivious of the
presence of a third person. I was free to study his fine face
without embarrassment. I watched him closely as he went
to the end of the room, turned and tramped back again, with
his hands behind him. I saw he was deeply troubled. Never
had I seen him look so grave.

Suddenly he stopped in front of his son and faced him:
“Well, Mr. Custis,” he said, “I have been up to see The Con-
gress and they do not seem to be able to do anything except
to eat peanuts and chew tobacco, while my army is starving.
I told them the condition the men were in, and that something
must be done at once, but I can’t get them to do anything, or
they are unable to do anything.”

* The author of this article is a nephew of Robert E. Lee, being the son of
Charles Carter Lee, General Lee’s brother.—(Editors)
He did not say what he asked "The Congress" to do, nor what his object was in going to see that body, except as revealed by the mention of the condition of his army, so I supposed that it had reference to obtaining supplies for the needs of his men; but there was some bitterness in his tones, and the idea struck me that he had been asking for something which, he thought, could be done and which Congress was neglecting or declining to do.

The General resumed his promenade, but, after a few more turns, he again stopped in the same place and resumed: "Mister Custis, when this war began, I was opposed to it, bitterly opposed to it, and I told these people that, unless every man should do his whole duty, they would repent it; and now (he paused slightly as if to give emphasis to his words) they will repent."

Of course I do not mean to say that I am giving the exact words used by the General, either in narrating the above incident or in any others mentioned in this article; but in this instance I am quite sure that I have not varied far from his very words, for I was deeply and solemnly impressed by that which he said and by the whole scene. I remember perfectly well saying, in my thoughts, that conditions must be almost hopeless for him to say what he did.

Years afterwards I learned from the memoirs of John Goode, a member of the Confederate Congress, that General Lee had been in conference with the Virginia delegation, and that he had told them of the difficulties he was encountering in his efforts to hold the Richmond lines. The President had asked him to do this in order to ascertain whether the people of Virginia, in the opinion of their representatives, would make new sacrifices of food to keep the army from starvation.

On another occasion I saw that same grave and troubled look on the face of General Lee. When Richmond was evacuated, on the night of April 2nd, 1865, the cadets of the Virginia Military Institute (of whom I was one) were disbanded, and I went by my home in Powhatan County, got a horse, and went to join the army. It was my intention to report to Gen-
eral Custis Lee, who had told me to do so, if at any time I should leave the cadets and join the regular army, saying also that he would find a place for me in connection with his staff. Some members of the Powhatan Troop, of the 4th Regiment of Virginia Cavalry, also went by their homes on the withdrawal from Petersburg to get fresh horses. I joined them and we rode to a point near Farmville, whither the army had retreated, dogged by General Grant's army. There I saw General Lee, who was dismounted and in conversation with some officers. My friends desired to know where their regiment could be found, so I left my horse and went towards him. He saw me and, leaving the officers with whom he had been speaking, took a few steps in my direction. When I got close enough, without other salutation, he asked: "My son, why did you come here?"

He looked very grave and tired, and there was a tone of distress in his voice as he made the inquiry. I replied that I thought it my duty to come.

"You ought not to have come. You can't do any good here," he replied.

I then said that I had come, because, if I stayed at home, I would be made a prisoner.

He looked at me kindly and said: "No, I don't think they would do that."

Intent on my purpose and anxious to locate my prospective commander, I asked him where General Custis Lee was. He replied: "I fear he has been captured"—as indeed he had been on the previous day.

While talking to me he was holding in his hand a slice of bread on which there was a leg of fried chicken, and, seeing some officers approaching, he asked if I had had any breakfast. Upon my saying No, he handed me the bread and chicken and told me to go somewhere and eat it, as he would have to meet those officers.

That was my breakfast on the morning of April 7th, 1865, and it was the last morsel I had, except some parched corn that night, a small piece of cold corn bread on the 8th, and a
little piece of raw bacon the following morning, until about
twelve o'clock on the night of the 9th. Then an angel, robed
as a woman, in the market place at Lynchburg, gave me a
large slice of bread, on which there was a thick slice of boiled
country cured ham. The combination afforded me the most
welcome and best tasting meal I ever had.

I was not captured at Appomattox, because I escaped with
a remnant of Munford's brigade. I stayed around in the
mountains, where Roanoke now is, until the first part of May,
1865, when I returned to my home.

On arriving there I learned that General Joseph E. John-
ston had surrendered and that our cause was lost. There-
upon I went to Richmond to give myself up and be paroled.
Entering the proper office, I saw that many others were
wanting to get their papers and that I would have to wait a
long time, maybe many hours, before I would get mine.
However, there was nothing else to do, so I took my place at
the end of a long line of men, who seemed to be moving up
very slowly indeed.

While standing there my boyish appearance, I suppose,
attracted the notice of a Federal non-commissioned officer,
who was acting as an orderly. He came to where I was and
asked: "Were you in the army?" I replied that I was.
He then queried: "They didn't put boys like you in the
army, did they?" The tones of his voice expressed mingled
doubt and surprise, so I explained to him that I had been a
cadet at the Virginia Military Institute, had been in battle
with the battalion from that institution, that the battalion
had been made a part of the Confederate Army, and that I
had seen other service also. He then asked my name, and,
when I gave it, he asked if I were related to General Robert
E. Lee. I replied that he was my uncle. The orderly then
left me, but in a little while he returned and told me to follow
him as "The Captain" wanted to see me. I did as he requested
and was led into a room, where a good-looking officer in uni-
form was seated at a table. He arose as I approached him,
spoke to me very kindly, asked me to be seated, took a seat
himself, wrote down on a prepared form the answers I made to several questions, and then handed the paper to the orderly. “Take this,” he said, “and get Mr. Lee’s parole.”

While the orderly was gone, the Captain talked to me in a friendly way, asked me about the military service I had seen and about other matters, and seemed to be interested in my replies. When the orderly returned, I signed a paper or two, but was not asked to take any oath or make any promise, except such as was contained in the papers I signed. When I arose to go, he handed me a paper. Then, when I thanked him for his kindness and said good-bye, he made some kind remark to me personally and continued:

“We fought your uncle for several years, but have always admired him. We think he is a great soldier and a great man, and I am very glad of this opportunity to show my appreciation of him, by performing this little act of kindness to his nephew.”

I again thanked him and left the room, the orderly accompanying me to the door. I thanked him also for the kindness he had shown me, and he reiterated, in substance, what the Captain had said.

The result of such treatment was that I felt very differently towards my former enemies, and, since that time, I have always had kindly feelings in my heart for the real soldiers—those who did the fighting.

In September, 1866, I became a student at Washington College, of which General Lee had, in the meantime, become president. I was there for two sessions. I did not room in the General’s house, but took my meals with the household and was treated as one of the family. There I learned to love and admire him much more than I had done before. It is as the husband, father, and kindly Christian gentleman, and as the instructor and guide of youth, that I like to remember him, rather than as the soldier.

I have seen it stated that General Lee died of a broken heart, borne down by grief and sorrow, by reason of the loss
of the cause he had served so faithfully, and because of the sacrifice of thousands of loved countrymen. It has been affirmed many times that, as the burden of the hope and expectation of success was greater on him than all others, so the burden of disappointment caused by the failure to fulfill such hope and expectation, was likewise greater.

There are foundations for such thoughts, for he grieved sorely over the blood shed in that unhappy struggle, to which he had been so bitterly opposed, and he sorrowed for the tremendous losses suffered by his people. His health had also been injured by the trials he had passed through. But in my daily intercourse with him, from 1866 to 1868, he did not strike me as an unhappy man, nor as one whose heart was broken. His mind was too strong and healthy for that and his abiding and implicit faith in the just judgments of Almighty God, by whose hand he believed the destiny of his country was guided, was of such character as to lead him to accept the results of the war with quiet resignation. He did not have the manner of a man borne down by disappointment and grief. It is true that he was generally grave and reserved, but this was natural with him. It is also true that I noticed, frequently, a sad expression in his eyes, especially when his face was in repose, and this was to be expected; but I also remember many times when those eyes sparkled with merriment, and when his face was wreathed with smiles. In his family circle, especially at meal time, he was bright and cheerful. He had a good deal of quiet humor and enjoyed a gentle joke.

There was a certain church at Lexington in which the evening services were well attended, as a rule. It was rather "the thing" for the fair daughters of the town to attend those services, escorted by those college boys who were fortunate enough to secure engagements.

One Monday morning, at breakfast, with a smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eyes, the General said to me: "A sweet young friend of ours, in church last night, seemed to be
very uneasy and troubled about something, and I have been thinking of advising my young lady friends to wear pins in the shoulders of their dresses, points up."

I suspected what was coming, but asked: "Why, sir? What was troubling her?"

He replied, "She was intently watching a young gentleman's head which, seemingly, was about to rest itself on her shoulder, and she was pushing herself as far back in the corner of the pew as she could."

"And the pins," I began.

"Yes, the pins in their dresses would, when the gentleman's head fell on a shoulder, cause him to awake to the realities about him."

I laughed and admitted that I had been very sleepy in church the night before, and said I would try to do better in the future. He answered that, in such an event, the pins might be unnecessary, but that he thought the suggestion one which his sweet young friends might take into consideration. At the least, he suggested, I might arm with a pin the next young lady I took to church at night, so that she might prod me into consciousness, if the occasion required.

I had noticed that, sometimes in church, he sat with his eyes closed; but I never saw him nod or give any sign of being asleep, beyond the mere fact of having his eyes shut. One night, however, his lids were dropped so long that I felt he must have slept some, and I also felt that my chance to get even with him had come. I was rather afraid to banter him, as he was not one to take liberties with, but at breakfast one morning I found he was in a playful humor, so I ventured to say: "Uncle Robert, I think I saw an old gentleman last Sunday night in church, who sat with his eyes closed for some time, though his head did not threaten to lay itself on the shoulder of the lady sitting by him." He smiled, as if much amused, and replied quickly: "Did you? Well, you must recollect that old people are allowed to cogitate sometimes with their eyes closed."
On one occasion I was a bit dazed to receive a notice to call at his office at a certain hour. I would have much preferred to decline the invitation, but I had not "cut" any lectures, had not missed Chapel services without a reasonably good excuse, and had been receiving fair marks; so I answered the summons without any great perturbation of spirit. When I entered his office and reported, he told me that in one or two studies my marks were not up to the standard desired by him, were not as pleasing as he would like them to be, and he wanted to find out what the trouble was, and how he could help me.

The truth was, I had not been studying as hard as I should have. I had some excuse, because my eyes, which were naturally weak, had been troubling me, so I dwelt on that, but admitted, along with it, that somehow or other, I did not seem to be able to get the right grasp on my studies. I carefully neglected to mention another ailment of the eyes, that familiar malady of mind which causes a boy to see a fair face shining so radiantly between him and the printed page that he either does not see, or else does not comprehend, the printed words. I must admit that it was futile for me to attempt to conceal the effect of those radiant eyes and that fair face on my mind and heart, for I have since learned that I was about the only person who did not know that all of my friends were fully cognizant of my condition.

The General listened kindly to my excuses, and then asked me what exercise I had been taking. He was always insistent that all persons, who could do so, should take regular exercise. I replied that I had been going on long walks almost daily, but I did not think it necessary to tell with whom the most of these rambles had been made. He then asked whether, when I took my exercise, I thought of my studies.

This question was a poser, because I did not then know whether he thought I should do so or not. If I told the whole truth, I would have to say I did not, and that my peculiar
disease affected my mind quite as much as it did my eyes. Therefore I had to "side-step" a little. Remembering that some problems, especially in mathematics, lingered persistently in my mind, I told him that I sometimes thought of them. His reply was that this would not do. I should put all such thoughts out of my mind while taking exercise. He said to be properly benefited by my walks, I should cast aside every care, worry, and thought of my work and should make the most of the pleasant thoughts conjured up as I strolled.

This was comforting advice to a boy who had been following it religiously, but without knowing the General's opinion on the subject, especially when his exercise took the form of long walks with the owner of the charming eyes and lovely face that blurred the pages; but the boy did not think it necessary to tell the General so. However, feeling it was proper to say something, I replied that I could not see how one could help thinking of a thing—a problem in mathematics, for instance, which so forced itself on his thoughts, that on several occasions, I had walked in the night and had stayed out there, fully conscious, until I had found the solution that had escaped me in my hours of study.

"You will find it difficult, at first, to banish such thoughts and to control the operation of your mind under all circumstances," he answered, "but the power can be gained by determination and practice. When I was with the army, I had to take daily rides in order to obtain the exercise that was necessary for me. When I got on my horse and took such rides, no matter what battle or movement was impending, and no matter what my cares and troubles were, I put all such things out of my mind and thought only of my ride, of the scenes around me, or of other pleasant things, and so returned to my work refreshed and relieved and in a better and stronger condition. If it had not been for this power, I do not see how I could have stood what I had to go through with. Now, try it, and you will find that, even with less exercise
than you have been taking, you will feel much stronger and
better and will be able to manage your tasks with greater
satisfaction to yourself and friends."

He was right. In a very short time after our conversa-
tion my marks took a decided rise, and there was a general
improvement in my condition, especially in my eyes and mind
This probably resulted, however, less from faithful conform-
ity to his advice than from the fact that the prime cause of
my ailment departed from Lexington to a seminary of learn-
ing for young ladies in another town.

On another occasion I was invited to pay a visit to the
president at his office. The invitation worried me a good
deal, because I had been absent from a lecture in mathe-
matics, which I should have attended at about nine o’clock one
Monday morning. This miss was caused, remotely, by
another Miss, the same one who had gone away from Lex-
ington to school. I had visited her and had not left on Sun-
day night in time to reach Lexington for my lecture in mathe-
matics.

I had reported to Colonel William Allan, my fine mathe-
matics teacher, who had been an officer under Jackson. I
had explained the matter to his satisfaction, so I hoped it
would go no farther; but, when I got the invitation to call
on the president of the College, I felt that my hope was
unfounded.

The General’s office was then next to a lecture room in
which the singing class took lessons and practiced in the
afternoon, at an hour just previous to that at which I had
to report. I belonged to the class, but that particular after-
noon the noise made by the “do, re, mis” and by the snatches
of song by about fifty lusty youths almost maddened me, on
edge as I was for that interview.

When I went into the president’s office, he was sitting at
a table with a pile of freshly written letters by him. He
asked me to be seated and told me he had received a letter
from my father regarding some business matter (something
about paying for some books furnished me), which, he said, had been all settled, and which, he thought, I should be informed of. He did not mention my missing my lecture, but I learned afterwards that Colonel Allan had told him what my excuse was and had repeated to him my promise that such a thing should not happen again. The General’s sympathies had been excited by the peculiar ailment with which I was afflicted and my excuse and promise to Colonel Allan had been taken as sufficient. However, the old General emphasized the obligation by which all persons were bound to do their duty and to put it ahead of all pleasures. I cannot remember what I said, but, when he intimated that our interview was over, and when I reached the door and was about to open it, his manner was so kind and he seemed to be in such a pleasant mood that I asked him: “How long have you been in this room, sir?”

“For some time,” he replied.

“And have you been working in here?”

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“Because I don’t see how anybody could work in this room while all that horrible noise was going on in the next one.”

An amused smile passed over his countenance, doubtless at the reflection that I was one of those making the noise, but he said gravely; “Necessary noise never troubles me. In the midst of battle, for instance, with the roar of artillery and muketry around me; amidst the screaming and bursting of shells and whistling of bullets, and amid all the noise and hubbub of such an occasion, I could sit on my horse, attend to my duties and write a despatch or other papers, undisturbed by what was going on, as easily as I can write a letter in my office here. We must learn to control ourselves under all circumstances; and noises which are the result of necessity or useful employment, should never disturb anyone. Never allow yourself to be disturbed by necessary noises.”
I thought of that admonition and saw how well he heeded it himself, when a friend subsequently described General Lee’s bearing at Second Manassas, as described by General R. F. Hoke of North Carolina. General Lee was performing what, critics say, is one of the most exacting tests of military genius—the successful convergence of two armies on the field of battle—a feat that is apt to throw any general off his poise.

General Hoke was sitting on his horse, near General Lee, not so very far from where Jackson was fiercely engaged with the enemy. General Hoke was watching, waiting and hoping intensely for Longstreet to come into contact with the enemy and relieve Jackson, but his hope seemed to be in vain. Jackson was being hard pressed and would, inevitably, have to retreat or be crushed, if not soon relieved. Minutes passed and Longstreet did not come. It did not seem possible for Jackson to last much longer. More precious minutes, more assaults on Jackson’s weakening lines, and still no Longstreet. Where was he? How close? What was he doing? Why did he not get in the fight? How much longer could Jackson hold out, and, if he could not hold his position, what then?

General Hoke was so intensely excited that he could hardly sit still on his horse. Others about him were a-quiver. Everybody’s nerves were at the tensest—everybody’s except General Lee’s. His countenance did not show the least excitement or concern. When some teams and wagons passed by, the General looked at the mules as though he were making an inspection far to the rear, and said to an officer near him: “I observe that some of those mules are without shoes. I wish you would see to it that all of the animals be shod at once.”

The nearby soldiers were thinking only of Longstreet and were wondering if he ever would come up. Nerves were screwed tighter and tighter as men gripped themselves. A little longer and Jackson’s line would certainly be broken.
That might mean defeat, disaster, the ruin of the army. Still Lee did not blink an eye. At last Longstreet's guns opened, and his volleys could be heard. General Hoke and the others felt as though the army had been saved from doom. They could scarcely refrain from throwing their hats in the air. General Hoke looked at once to see whether his chief exhibited the same emotions, but he could not see the twitching of a muscle or the slightest change of expression. Throughout the whole of that nerve-racking scene, General Lee's face exhibited the same calm composure, neither shaken by the shadow of defeat, nor elated by the success of his plans.

I have heard of some people saying that they were awed by General Lee's presence, and others have spoken and written of his almost constant sadness of expression; but I never felt such awe, and his face lives in my memory as that of a quiet and rather grave gentleman, who was always cheerful in the family circle and uniformly kind to and considerate of those about him. He never impressed me as one who was always grieving over the past. I know he sorrowed for the failure of the cause to which he gave so much, and for the terrible sacrifices made; but he never exhibited the agony of spirit that we are apt to attribute to a man whose cause has failed. He did not have the time to give himself over to grief and to mourning for that which he had lost, because he gave himself, with all of his thoughts and energies, to his work as president of the college. I have always believed, too, that he felt he was doing more than winning battles when he was leading the young men of the South in the paths of peaceful education, and was doing his part in making them Christian gentlemen. I know that he regarded the blessings of peace as far better than the so-called honors of war.

I have heard it said, also, and have seen it averred in print, that he was a lonely man—one who never gave himself to anybody. The question has even been asked: "Did anyone really know him?" He was, certainly, very reserved, and I doubt if any person ever did know him altogether unless it
were his wife; but I never noticed that he was cold and distant, and remember him as one who had a good deal of quiet humor, which was frequently exhibited in many ways. Indeed, I remember that, on one occasion, I even heard him pun. It came about in this way.

A very sweet and bright, but petite, young lady, a Miss Long, was paying a visit to his daughters; and a gentleman, whose intentions seemed to be serious, was paying devoted attention to the visitor. The gentleman’s calls at the General’s house were so frequent that one of the ladies made a playful remark upon that fact. With a bright smile and mischievous twinkle in his eyes, the General chimed in: “Yes, he is different from most men; he wants but little here below, but wants that little Long.”

The General had a warm and kind heart, which made him judge, with lenience, the failures of others, and which led him to sound, at the proper time, the heartfelt praise of those he admired.

General Hampton, of South Carolina, was in Lexington on one occasion to make an address to the literary societies of Washington College. While there, General Lee had him to dinner one day with the family. As I entered the parlor some minutes before the time for that meal, I found the two generals in the room. They were evidently talking about Early’s valley campaign, and its failure; for, as I stepped into the room, I heard General Lee say: “When everything is known, I do not think that General Early will be blamed as much as he has been.”

I took a seat across the room from the generals, picked up a book, read a little while, and tried not to “listen in” on their conversation, which they carried on in low tones. Presently I heard the name of General J. E. B. Stuart mentioned. Then I looked up from my book and at General Lee, who was speaking in clear and pleased tones which could easily be heard over the whole room. He said: “General Stuart was my ideal of a soldier. He was always cheerful under all cir-
cumstances, always ready for any work and always reliable. He was able to stand any amount of fatigue and privation. When he stopped for a night's rest, he could throw himself on the ground, and, with his saddle or a log for a pillow, he would fall asleep almost immediately, and sleep as if in a bed. Then, if I sent an officer to him with an order, he was awake at the first call or touch. When his eyes opened, his mind became fully awake. He did not have to yawn or stretch to get himself awake, but his mind and body seemed to awake at the same time and to become active and alert. Before any other officer that I ever had could get himself and his men awake, Stuart would be in his saddle, have his men in line, and be ready to move."

As I have said before, I only mean to give the substance of what the General said by use of quotation marks; but I think that in this instance I have come very near giving his exact language, for as I had a great admiration for Stuart, I listened with great attention and tried to remember the language used. However, I am not certain whether the General said that Stuart would "be ready to move" or would "be in motion." As to what was said of General Early, I have no doubt that I have used his exact words, or practically so.

These incidents at Lexington, and others that I might relate, seem to me to take General Lee off that pedestal of loneliness and aloofness on which some writers and speakers seem to place him. The things I saw made him more like one of our fellows—made him a person we know and love; one who meets us a part of the way, at least, and lets us into those recesses of his spirit wherein dwell the pleasantries and amenities of social intercourse.

He was not a sort of demigod, sitting on a pedestal far removed from other men, cold, gloomy and unapproachable, but a man—a warm-blooded child of God, striving to find and walk in His ways, loving his fellow men as, or even better than, himself; and his brightest earthly reward is that, in his own language,
"There is a true glory and a true honor, the glory of duty done, the honor of integrity of principle."

By principles of patriotism, fealty, honor and duty, born before the days of the Revolution, striven for in that war, ingrained in the very being of Virginians, fixed in his soul by inheritance from a long line of patriotic ancestors and taught him by his father's words, Virginia was his country and her behests were to him as the commands of God, which he was bound to obey. So, when he fought for the Confederacy, he was a Virginian and an American. But, above all, he gave his allegiance to his God. When, by the will of his God, as he interpreted it, his cause went down in defeat, he bowed to that will and became, first an American, and then a Virginian. He gave his duty and allegiance to the Union and strove to lead his people of the Southland to abandon all local animosities and to be good and patriotic Americans.