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PRIZE ESSAY

Miss Moseley's Splendid Paper on the Life and Character of

ROBERT EDWARD LEE

Read at the Anniversary Celebration of Lee's Birthday, January 19, 1910.

SOMETIME ago the Junius Daniel Chapter, Daughters of the Confederacy, offered a prize of \$5 in gold for the best essay on the life and character of General R. E. Lee by any pupil of the Weldon High School. Several beautifully prepared papers were submitted to a committee of three in Richmond, the committee having no knowledge of the authors of the papers sent in. By a unanimous vote they decided in favor of the essay prepared by Miss Agnes Moseley, of Weldon, and the essay is here given in full as follows:

ROBERT EDWARD LEE.

"To all who admire genius in a great commander, to all who prize true worth and merit in a citizen of spotless integrity, to all who appreciate self-sacrifice in a patriot, to all who love nobleness of mind and uprightness of life, both public and domestic, no man appeals perhaps more strongly or awakens a keener interest than does Robert Edward Lee, a soldier without an equal, a man without a peer.

Robert, the eldest son of "Light Horse Harry" Lee, the valiant and courageous soldier of the Revolution, was born at Stratford, Westmoreland county, Virginia, on the nineteenth of January, 1807. When he was only eleven years old his father died. If he was a good boy, it was his mother who kept him so, for he never knew a father's care. His mother once said to a friend, "How can I spare Robert! He is both a son and a daughter to me." He entered West Point Military Academy at the early age of eighteen. Here he remained four years and in that time never received a demerit. On account of his good deportment and scholarly attainments, upon his graduation he was appointed to the United States corps of engineers, a position of honor and distinction, and thus became Lieutenant Lee.

Lieutenant Lee was married on the 30th of June, 1831, to Mary Custis, the great granddaughter of Mrs. Washington, and the only child of George Parke Custis, the adopted son of Washington.

In 1846, war broke out between the United States and Mexico, and Lee was sent to Mexico to aid Gen. Scott. In the campaign from Vera Cruz to the Mexican capital, he so distinguished himself as to win admiration and esteem from his comrades, and promotion and unstinted praise from his superior officers. In after years General Scott was heard to say that his great success in Mexico was due to the skill and valor of Robert Edward Lee, and that he was the best soldier he ever saw in the field.

The crisis in his life came when at the outbreak of the civil war he was called upon to decide whether he would support the Union, or cast in his lot and share the fate of his native State. On one side, by the offer of the supreme command of the whole Northern army, lay hopes of a brilliant military career, final success, honor and glory. On the other, home, kindred, friends, Virginia, whose name from infancy he had been taught to reverence and love, and a cause, which, none better than he knew, was almost a forlorn hope. He said to Mr. Blair, who came to offer him the command of the army: "If I owned the four million of slaves in the South, I would give them all up to save the Union, but how can I draw my sword upon Virginia, my native State?" So, when Mr. Lincoln called for troops to send against the South, Lee turned his back upon "wealth, rank, and all that a great power could give him, and offered his stainless sword to his native State." His great soul was wrung with grief, but he obeyed the call of duty. He went at once to Richmond, and was made Major-General of the Virginia troops.

During the first months of the war, General Lee was kept in Richmond to send Virginia men who came to fight for the South to the place where they were most needed. Then, in 1861, he was

ragged, battle-scarred old Confederate, who said to some of his new found friends in blue, "You uns need not think that you uns have done whipped we uns. You uns hain't done no such a thing. We uns have just wore ourselves out a whipping of you uns. Now we uns are going to try to live peaceable with you uns, but if you uns don't believe yourselves mighty pretty, we uns are going to whip you uns again."

After his surrender, Lee rode out among his men, who pressed up to him, eager to "touch his person or even his horse," and tears fell down the powder-stained cheeks of the strong men. Slowly he said: "Men we have fought the war together; I have done my best for you; my heart is too full to say more." And then in silence, with lifted hat, he rode through the weeping army towards his home in Richmond.

In October, 1865, General Lee became president of Washington College, in Lexington, Virginia. Many other places of trust were offered him, but he chose to lead the young men of the South in the paths of peace and learning as he had so nobly done in times of war. Some one has aptly said, "Suns seem larger when they set," so it was with Lee. At this time of his life he appears nobler and grander than ever before. In his quiet study, away from the noise of the world, he gave his time and talents to the young men of his dear South. In his life as college president, duty was, as ever, his watchword.

During the five years here, he was permitted to exhibit to his countrymen, the best qualities of citizen, sage, and patriot. As the people saw him fulfilling these modest but noble functions, as they saw him with antique simplicity putting aside every temptation to use his great fame for vulgar gain; as they saw him, in self-respecting contentment with the frugal earnings of his personal labor, refusing every offer of pecuniary assistance; as they realized his unselfish devotion of all that remained of strength and life to the nurture of the Southern youth in knowledge and morals, a new conviction of his wisdom and virtue gathered force and volume, and spread abroad to other lands.

Early in 1870, in the midst of these labors, his health began to fail. There was a flush upon his cheek, and an air of weariness about him which alarmed his friends. Rheumatism of the heart and other parts of the body had set in, and in March, 1870, he went South. His health seemed better when again at home; but soon his step was slower, and the flush upon his cheek began to deepen. "A noble life was drawing to a close."

On October 10th, about midnight, he was seized with a chill and his pulse became feeble and rapid. The next day he was seen to be sinking. He knew those around him, but was unable to speak. Soon after nine o'clock on the morning of the 12th he closed his eyes on earthly things and his pure soul took its flight to God.

It was the thought that the strain and hardships of war, with sorrow of the "Lost Cause" and griefs of his friends, had caused his death. Yet, to those who saw his calmness in all the trials of life, it did not seem true that his great soul had been worn away by them. The college chapel was chosen by Mrs. Lee as a burial place for her husband; and on the 15th of October, the body was born to the tomb. Virginia mourned for her noble son, and the State Legislature passed a bill making January 19th, the birthday of Robert E. Lee, a legal holiday.

It is the unanimous testimony of the men who lived and acted with him, that Lee was the purest and best man of action whose career history has recorded. In his whole life, laid bare to the gaze of the world, the least friendly criticism has never discovered one simple deviation from the narrow path of rectitude and honor.

No man can consider his life without a feeling of renewed hope and trust in mankind. There is about his exhibitions of moral excellence the same quality of power in reserve that marks him as a soldier. He never failed to come up to the full requirements of any situation, and his conduct communicated the impression that nothing could arise to which he would be found unequal. His every action went straight to the mark without affection or display. It cost him no visible effort to be good or great. He was not conscious that he was exceptional in either way, and he died in the belief that as he had been sometimes unjustly blamed, so he had as often been too highly praised.

Perhaps no man ever lived so great, so good, so unselfish as Lee. Duty was the keynote of his life. In the midst of his greatness he was humble, simple and gentle. He loved little children wherever he met them.

One day, during the war, a number of little girls were rolling hoops on the sidewalks in Richmond, when General Lee came riding toward them. They stopped playing to gaze at so great a man. To their surprise, he threw his reins to his courier, dismounted, and kissed every one of them.

Then mounting, he rode away with a sunny smile of childhood in his heart, and plans of great battles in his mind.

While in Petersburg, in the winter of 1864, he went to preaching one day at a crowded church, and saw a little girl, dressed in faded garments, standing just inside the door, and looking for a seat.

"Come with me, my little lady," said the great soldier, "and you shall sit by me." Thus the great chief and poor child sat side by side.

A gentleman tells this story, which is quite in keeping with General Lee's way of pleasing children:

"When my little girl, about four years old, heard of General Lee's death, she said to me, 'Father, I can never forget General Lee.' I asked 'Why?' 'Because, when I was playing in the garden one day, and General Lee was riding by, he stopped and took off his hat and bowed to us and said, 'Young ladies, don't you think this is the prettiest horse you ever saw?' We said it was a very pretty horse. 'Oh, no!' he said, 'I want to know whether Traveler is not the very prettiest horse you ever saw in your life.' And when we looked at him, and saw how white and gay he was, we said, 'Yes.' Then he laughed and said, 'Well, if you think he is so pretty, I will just let you kiss him!' and then he rode off smiling, and I don't believe I can ever forget that."

Another gentleman, who was clerk of the faculty at Washington College, says that General Lee was very careful about little things. One day the clerk wrote a letter to someone at General Lee's request, in which he used the term "our students." When General Lee looked at it, he said, that he did not like the phrase "our students." He said that we had no property rights in the young men, and he thought it best to say, "the students," not "our students." The clerk struck out with his pen the word "our" and wrote "the." He then brought the letter to General Lee. "This will not answer," he said, "I want you to write the letter over." So the clerk had to make a fresh copy.

This story is often told of him. In 1864 when General Lee was on the lines below Richmond, many soldiers came near him and thus brought to them the fire of the foe. He said to the soldiers: "Men, you had better go into the back yard; they are firing up here and you might get hurt." The men obeyed, but saw their dear General walk across the yard, pick up some object and place it in a tree over his head. They found out that the object he had risked his life for was only a little bird which had fallen out of its nest. God had given the stern chief a heart so tender that he could pause amid a rain of shot and shell to care for a tiny fallen birdling.

General Lee was noted for his want of hatred towards any one. He called the northern soldiers "those people." Once in the midst of a fierce battle, he said to his son Robert, who was bravely working at a big gun, "That's right, my son, drive those people back." When told of Jackson's fatal wound his eye flashed fire and his face flushed as he thought of his great loss, but he quietly said, "General Jackson's plans shall be carried out. Those people shall be driven back today."

General Lee was more than brave and tender, he was meek, yet with a heart big enough to love every one of his soldiers, and great enough to plan long marches and glorious battles.

The real corner-stone of his life was his trust in God. Whatever came to him, he always said, "God's will be done." The death of his wife, General W. H. Fitzhugh Lee, gave General Lee much grief. The former General was wounded and taken prisoner. While in prison his lovely wife died. In this bitter grief, General Lee wrote to his son these words: "My whole trust is in God, and I am ready for whatever he may ordain."

General Lee gave freely of his small means to his church and to the poor. At a vestry meeting which took place the evening of his illness, the sum of fifty-five dollars was needed for the pay of the Rector. Though he had before given his share, General Lee said in a low voice, "I will give the sum." These were the last words he spoke to the vestry and this giving his last public act.

General Custis Lee was made President of the college in his father's place. The college is now called the "Washington and Lee" University, after Washington and Lee, the two great names in the history of our country.

After the death of General Lee, many speeches were made in his praise, and many letters were written telling of the sorrow of his friends. These letters came not only from the South, but from the North and other lands. The New York Herald said these kind words of him:

"In a quiet autumn morning, in the land he loved so well, and, he held, he had served so faithfully, the spirit of Robert Edward Lee left the clay which it had so much ennobled, and travelled out of this world into the great and unknown land.

"Not to the Southern people alone shall be limited the tribute of a tear over the dead Virginian. Here in the North, forgetting that the time was when the sword of Robert E. Lee was drawn against us, we have long since ceased to look upon him as a Confederate leader, but have claimed him as one of ourselves, for Robert Edward Lee was an American, and the great nation which gave him birth would today be unworthy of such a son if she looked upon him lightly."

The London Standard gave this tribute to Lee: "A country which has given birth to men like him, and those who followed him, may look the chivalry of Europe in the face without shame; for the lands of Sidney and of Bayard never brought forth a nobler soldier, gentleman and Christian, than Robert Edward Lee."

General W. Preston spoke of him thus: "I knew him first when he was a captain. At that time, General Scott had decided upon Lee as a man who would make his mark if he were ever called upon to do great work. He never drank, he never swore an oath, but there was never dispute among gentlemen in which his

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