

March 2021

Transcription of original notes by Judge Benton Randolph of his October, 1870, address on the Walker County courthouse steps, Huntsville, Texas. Judge Randolph was an officer in Hood's Texas Brigade during the Civil War. He is the great-grandfather of James K. Randolph, Washington & Lee AB 1961, Law 1963. The remarks contain eye-witness impressions of General Robert E. Lee.

.....
.....

General Robert E. Lee, the Christian gentleman and hero of abundant battles, breathed his last at Lexington, Virginia, at 30 minutes past nine o'clock AM on the 12th day of October in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and seventy of congestion of the brain, at the age of sixty-three years, eight months and two days.

Such, ladies and gentlemen, is the substance of the telegram which first conveyed to the world the sad news of the loss of him whose loss we have met here to mourn. And although the wires had partially prepared the public mind for the reception of such intelligence, it is impossible to describe the deep grief and gloom which its announcement caused to spread, like a pall, all over the land. Business was suspended, the bells were tolled, and the people, through the press, in public and in private gave spontaneous vent to their sorrow-stricken souls. Though the flags of the nation are not lowered, the hearts of her people, even in the northland, are at half-mast and with us mourn the loss of departed greatness.

Yea, in every heart,
where presses work or wires run,
where requiems of the great are sung,
the journals teem with leaden lines
of mourning and burning words of eulogy.

Men everywhere do homage to merit, and
today the world in sackcloth mourns her fallen son.

I behold around me a few of the veterans of the Old Texas Brigade that served so long and gallantly under his command. And while none would willingly fight over those battles, I doubt if any price could purchase the consolation which they now derive from having time and again been the recipients of complementary orders from one of the noblest soldiers either of ancient or modern times.

Would that I could correctly sketch him as he was, and accurately delineate his character as it is. No one ever saw him, I presume, who did not turn, and look, and look again. He was large, tall, handsome, and fully and harmoniously developed, mentally, physically and spiritually. His bearing was dignified, and it has been said that his look was austere, and I must confess that I thought something of the sort when I last saw him just before the surrender of his army at Appomattox, but I attribute it to a military education, and to a long and eventful life spent upon the tented field and in the bivouac. But if there was anything of harshness in his expression when I first saw him at an earlier period of the war, it dwelt in traces so faint that I failed to perceive it.

There was a degree of buoyancy and hope, a glow of youthful vigor and refined vitality that I never saw in any other human face.

His beard was full, fine, white and silken and trimmed as you usually see it in his photographs. His dress was of plain grey, with the simple insignia of the rank of general on his collar. He rode a large grey horse and was attended, as I afterwards observed was frequently his custom, by a single orderly. And although as before indicated, I had never seen him and had no positive evidence that one of the gentle-men I was about to meet was General Lee, I instinctively saluted him as the Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, and when he threw his countenance full upon me and lifted his hat in returning the salute, I felt that I had bowed to a brow that had beamed with thought, to a face with a radiant smile,

to a tender heart by its maker wrought without a single trace of guile.

I felt a degree of inspiration, or rather aspiration to be something noble, good and great, which was long in wearing away and which the presence of no other man ever incited.

Although I had fought under him and had for him that sort of attachment which common dangers, complimentary orders and successes on the part of the commander are likely to produce in the mind and heart of a soldier, yet it required an actual view of the man to give to me that unbounded confidence in him which I afterwards entertained and which, I believe, was shared by every soldier in his command.

It was this confidence, thus inspired, that kept his army together long after his successes had ceased and long after the hope that they would again be renewed had departed. Mutiny in his camps was unknown, and defeat, in its broad sense, was a stranger. It was the modern engine of attrition, irrevocably bent on the impartial destruction of all it met, that wore away and consumed his army.

To make the best use possible of the means furnished is not to fail. It is true that the cause to which he and the Southern people had embarked did fail, but his extraordinary prescience foresaw the end long before it came, and in words of warning pointed to the only means which in his judgment would prevent the great calamity. Notwithstanding that the Southern people had rejected his plans, his noble nature, when the dark hour came, never unbraided them, but with them quietly and patiently endured the legitimate results of their own folly, philosophically expending the remnant of his days in teaching them, among other things, both by precept and by example, to “for-get their poverty and remember their miseries no more.”

Were it necessary, this is neither the place nor the occasion to attempt a defense of the conduct of the people of the South during the late war, nor of the manner of General Lee's connection with them. It is enough to know that we maintained to the world that he violated no law, human or divine, but on the contrary, carried out the high behests of heaven when he joined his children in a deadly conflict which he did not produce and which, however much he deplored, he could not quell. History tells us he wept bitter tears

over the event. Duty pressed the cup to his lips and he drank of it to its muddy dregs.

In order to fully appreciate the character of this great and good man and draw from it those valuable lessons of wisdom which the Author of all good evidently intended should be taught to those who were so fortunate as to have lived at a contemporaneous period, it is necessary that we should familiarize ourselves with it and with the almost insurmountable difficulties which he encountered as he indelibly stamped it on the scroll of fame. This we can only hope to do when his full biography has been written. At present, we can only glance at a few of the most prominent acts of his life.

To graduate with honors in any college of standing, without receiving a single reprimand or mark of demerit during the whole of the collegiate course, is a feat rarely accomplished by the most promising. To have succeeded at an institution of learning where the discipline is as it is known to be at West Point must have required no ordinary exertion and indicated that General Lee, even at that early day, had resolved on carrying out what after-wards proved to be one of the leading characteristics of his life, to wit: to know his duty and to discharge it at all hazards.

To have served as an officer in the regular army of the United States for a period of twenty years in such a manner as to have frequently been the subject of complimentary notice by its commander in chief, General Scott and to have time and again been promoted for gallant conduct on the field of battle and when he tendered his resignation as Lieutenant Colonel, to have been the recipient of a proposition to take command of the entire army of the United States, then engaged in actual war, must have required an ability and devotion to country which up to that time had been displayed by few if any of the many officers of that powerful government.

To have lived in the calm tide of the world's affairs where no great commotions disturbed the common quiet, as to have been placed by common consent at the head of a mighty people with a worldwide reputation, unscathed by the poisonous darts of the envious, wicked and depraved, has been the fortune of but few. To have accomplished all this amid the throes of revolution, amid the want, danger, carnage and strife of a long and bloody war in which each was care-fully weighed and tried in that crucible which

made success the only test of merit, must have required talents of the first order. To have retained that reputation untarnished during the reverses which fell fast and thick upon him toward the close of his military career and to have so lived as to have been almost idolized even in retirement must have required virtues rarely possessed by the noblest sons of earth.

Hereafter, when the mother would incite to noble deeds her darling boy, she need go no farther away than the Old Dominion, that nursery of noblemen, nor she need no other history than of our own Sunny South. And if she succeeds in accurately delineating the character of General Lee, devout as a worshipper of his God, pure amid temptation, great in all he did and modest when the world praised him, she will have, with the skill of a sculp-tor, carved a perfect model without blemish around which her darling heart would throw the veil of charity and looking into those earnest eyes fixed upon, she need not hesitate to say, seek, my child, to be like him.

Pure as the snowflake on the congealed sea
in the far-off and bleak north zone,
is the name left by the lamented Lee,
to the noble youths of his sunny home.

His deeds of valor in history stand
like marble monuments to the great
both upon the plains of a foreign land
and the hills of his native state.

The purest virtues deck his path of life

like high stars in the Milky Way;
and each one as though in emulous strife
blazes all the higher today

As it blends with the soft rays from above
along the bright gleam behind him
where his soul's spirit is basking in love
bidding the sad world to join him.