

OPEN LETTERS.



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**An Interview with General Robert E. Lee.**

A YEAR or more before the death of General Lee, he came to Baltimore as one of a committee to enlist the authorities of the city and the president and directors of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in the project for a railroad down the Valley of Virginia.

I had met General Lee but once, and then only for a few minutes; and though his home during his last years was in my native place, I did not intend calling on him in Baltimore; but a Southerner of wealth, then in New York, Cyrus H. McCormick, having telegraphed me to see the General and invite him to come on and be his guest, I called upon him to deliver

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the invitation. The General said he was here on a hurried visit, that his duties to the College required his presence at home, and that with many thanks for the courtesy, and the hope that he would be able to enjoy the proffered hospitalities some other time, he must decline. I urged him not to carry out that decision, assuring him that the College would probably gain substantial benefit from his visiting my friend. He at length agreed to hold the question under consideration during a day or two he was to be absent in the country, and made an appointment for my meeting him on his return.

The two days having expired, I called again and found him expecting me. He stated that, having fully considered the subject, he had decided that he must return home. After again presenting reasons why he should make the visit to my friend, I said :

"I think I see, General, that the real difficulty lies in your shrinking from the conspicuity of a visit to New York. I can readily understand that this would be unpleasant. But you need not be exposed to any publicity whatever; my friend has given me *carte blanche* to make all arrangements for your coming. I will engage a compartment in the palace car of the night train, and will telegraph my friend to meet you with his carriage on your arrival in New York."

I shall never forget the deep feeling manifested in the tones of his voice, as he replied :

"Oh, Doctor, I couldn't go sneaking into New York in that way. When I do go there, I'll go in daylight, and go like a man."

I felt rebuked at having made the suggestion; and finding he was fixed in his determination, the subject was dropped. But he seemed in a talkative mood,—remarkably so, considering his reputation for taciturnity,—and immediately began to speak of the issues and results of the war. The topic which seemed to lie uppermost and heaviest on his heart was the vast number of noble young men who had fallen in the bloody strife. In this particular he regarded the struggle as having been most unequal. The North, he said, had, indeed, sent many of her valuable young men to the field; but as in all large cities there is a population which can well be spared, she had from this source and from immigrants from abroad unfailing additional supplies. The South, on the other hand, had none but her own sons, and she sent and sacrificed the flower of her land.

After dwelling with emphasis and with feeling on this point, the General then introduced another topic which also moved him deeply, viz., the persistent manner in which the leading Northern journals, and the Northern people generally, insisted that the object of the war had been to secure the perpetuation of slavery. On this point he seemed not only indignant, but hurt. He said it was not true. He declared that, for himself, he had never been an advocate of slavery; that he had emancipated most of his slaves years before the war, and had sent to Liberia those who were willing to go; that the latter were writing back most affectionate letters to him, some of which he received through the lines during the war. He said, also, as an evidence that the colored people did not consider him hostile to their race, that during this visit to Baltimore some of them who had known him when he was stationed here had come up in the most affectionate manner and

put their hands into the carriage-window to shake hands with him. They would hardly have received him in this way, he thought, had they looked upon him as fresh from a war intended for their oppression and injury. One expression I must give in his own words.

"So far," said General Lee, "from engaging in a war to perpetuate slavery, I am rejoiced that slavery is abolished. I believe it will be greatly for the interests of the South. So fully am I satisfied of this, as regards Virginia especially, that I would cheerfully have lost all I have lost by the war, and have suffered all I have suffered, to have this object attained." This he said with much earnestness.

After expressing himself on this point, as well as others in which he felt that Northern writers were greatly misrepresenting the South, he looked at me and, with emphasis, said :

"Doctor, I think some of you gentlemen that use the pen should see that justice is done us."

I replied that the feeling engendered by the war was too fresh and too intense for anything emanating from a Southern pen to affect Northern opinion; but that time was a great rectifier of human judgments, and hereafter the true history would be written; and that he need not fear that then injustice would be done him.

As the General was in a talking mood, he would have gone on much further, no doubt, but that at this point his son, General W. H. F. Lee, whom he had not seen for some time, and who had just arrived in Baltimore, entered the room.

*John Leyburn.*

BALTIMORE.