

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86) The original is very badly faded.

Grant's Personal Memoirs

Mr. Editor:

The time and space allotted to your Budget do not afford opportunity to review a book. Especially so, when that book, taken in all, is one of the most remarkable contributions to English Literature. Notwithstanding, I purpose giving a sketch of such a book. I refer to the "Personal Memoirs" of General Grant. I am perfectly safe in doing so, for two reasons: First, because those of your hearers who have already read the "Memoirs", will not begrudge an hour spent in going over again a work so full of instruction and entertainment: –and, Secondly, because those who have not read the book, will be surprised and glad when they come to make its acquaintance.

Leaving out of the account, as nearly as possible the personality of Grant, his successes and achievements, the "Memoirs" bear on their face unmistakable marks of true greatness, from whatever point of view is taken, a work that will stand the test of the severest critical examination. And when one considers the training, surroundings, and character of the soldier, he is filled with amazement to find a book of such genuine interest springing from such a source. Who is there, that five, ten, or fifteen years ago would have dreamed that General Grant, the first soldier of the age, – could write a book?

The key to the Memoirs may be found in the Preface, which begins with the trite quotation, "Man proposes and God disposes," and then adds, in Grant's own words, "There are but few important events in the affairs of men brought about by their own choice." The preface tells how the writer had often been urged to write such a book, and of his repeated refusals till adversity came upon him, and he was confined to his rooms by the injury received from a fall, when he was persuaded to contribute a number of war articles for the Century Magazine "for the money it gave" him; – and finding the work congenial, he continued it. He further says in his preface: "In preparing these volumes for the public, I have entered upon the task with the sincere desire to avoid doing injustice to any one, whether on the National or Confederate side, other than the unavoidable injustice of not making mention often, when special mention is due." No one who has read his first

volume can doubt that this pledge has been faithfully kept.

The first chapters of the book run along with reminiscences and comments that are highly entertaining, and there flows through all the earlier parts of the “Memoirs” a vein of humor that can not be imitated.

Speaking of his early school days, he says: – I never saw an algebra or other mathematical work higher than the arithmetic until after I was appointed to West Point. I then bought a book on algebra; but having no teacher, it was Greek to me.” He further says of his early school days: “I was not studious in habit, and probably did not make progress enough to compensate for the outlay for board and tuition. At all events, both winters were spent in going over the same old arithmetic which I knew every word of before, and repeating ‘A noun is the name of a thing’, which I had also heard my Georgetown teachers repeat until I have come to believe it; but I cast no reflections upon my old teacher Richardson.”

He does not hesitate to tell a good joke on himself, as for example, when he narrates an incident that happened soon after his graduation from West Point, and which incident, he frankly acknowledges, took the conceit out of him. He had just graduated, and had left his measurements with a tailor at the East, for a uniform. He “was impatient to get on my uniform and see how it looked, and probably wanted my old school-mates, particularly the girls, to see me in it.” Having donned this new uniform, he put off for Cincinnati on horseback, and it was not very long before his youthful self-importance was rebuked. He reached the city and was riding along one of the streets, when, to use his own language, ‘a little urchin, bareheaded, barefooted, with dirty and ragged pants, held up by a single gallows – that's what suspenders were called there, – and a shirt that had not seen a washtub for weeks, turned to me and cried “Soldier, will you work? No sir-ee. I'll see my shirt first.” The horse-trade and its dire consequences were recalled to mind.”

His chapters on the Mexican war are a brief, but at the same time intelligible and thoroughly interesting sketch of that memorable struggle, a contest which, as compared with late Civil War, was near boy's play. It is instructive to note his comments upon men and things. His judgment of Generals Scott and Taylor is worth repeating. General Grant says of them.

“The contrast between the two was very marked, General Taylor never wore a uniform, but dressed himself entirely for comfort. He moved about the

field in which he was operating to see through his own eyes the situation. Often he would be without staff officers, and when he was accompanied by them there was no prescribed order in which they followed. He was very much given to sit his horse sideways, with both feet on one side, particularly on the battle field.

“General Scott was the reverse of all these particulars. He always wore all the uniform prescribed or allowed by law. When he inspected his lines word would be sent to all division or brigade commanders in advance, notifying them of the hour when the commanding general might be expected. This was done so that all the army might be under arms to salute their chief as he passed. On these occasions he wore his dress uniform, cocked hat, aignillettes, sabre and spurs. His staff proper besides all officers constructively on his staff: – engineers, inspectors, quartermasters, etc. that could be spared, followed, also in uniform and in prescribed order..... General Scott was precise in language, cultivated a style particularly his own; was proud of his rhetoric; not averse to speaking of himself, often in the third person, and he could bestow praise on the person he was talking about without the least embarrassment. Taylor was not a conversationalist, but on paper he could put his meaning so plainly that there could be no mistaking about it. He knew how to express what he wanted to say in the fewest well-chosen words, but would not sacrifice meaning to the construction of high-sounding sentences. But with their opposite characteristics, both were great and successful soldiers, both were true, patriotic, and upright in their feelings. Both were pleasant to serve under; Taylor was pleasant to serve with.”

Some of his descriptions are ludicrous in the extreme; especially his account of the breaking of mules for service in the Mexican war. He closes that description with this remarkable statement, which I can not omit quoting. He says: “I am not aware of ever having used a profane expletive in my life; but I would have the charity to excuse those who may have done so, if they were in charge of a train of Mexican pack-mules at the time.” Think of it, Mr. Editor. Where is there a man that could assert that he had never been profane in his life?

General Grant's narration of the battles of the Civil War have scarcely been alluded to. But, Mr. Editor, the evening would be exhausted in sketching, even in outline, the merits of this work. No one can read the Memoirs without having an exalted opinion of its author. The writer is great in his

simplicity, modesty and generosity, and for his fairness in treating of friend and foe. In style, terse and always clear. There is no waste of words in his writings and none can fail to understand his meanings. The book is remarkable for its cheerful tone and calmness throughout. He never shows impatience, never a symptom of unkind feeling for any one. There is nowhere a hint that the writer was laboring under a load of misfortune or suffering bodily or mental pain while he penned those pages. And it is gratifying to know from one of the distinguished members of our Literary Club, who himself was in Congress while Grant was President, & who was on intimate terms of friendship with him that the book is a picture of the man “and is written as General Grant spoke in conversation.”

If there be any one who has ever entertained or perchance still entertains any doubts as to General Grant's greatness, as a soldier, civilian or man, in the highest sense of the term, then hasten to read the “Personal Memoirs.”

I should have been glad, Mr. Editor, to draw some comparison between the Memoirs of Grant and the Memoirs of Napoleon. But your private admonition forbids. I can not however refrain from remarking that there is a wide contrast between the two and that the advantage is overwhelmingly in favor of our hero. Perhaps Napoleon's account of battles are as graphic and as well-written as are those of General Grant. But Napoleon does not write for the masses. His Memoirs are for the student of battles, while Grant's are for the same student, and for the education, inspiration and entertainment of generations present and to come.

I can not close this contribution, Mr. Editor, without calling to mind that memorial tomb erected in Paris to the great Napoleon to which the four quarters of the globe have contributed their rarest marbles and indescribably beautiful stones – a tomb that baffles description for its exquisite beauty and magnificence, one that Solomon might have envied, and at the same time, deploring that neither the city of Cincinnati nor the state of Ohio, the state of his birth, has taken any step toward erecting a fitting monument to one of the greatest and grandest men of modern times.

Aaron A. Ferris

Budget
Hinman, editor
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