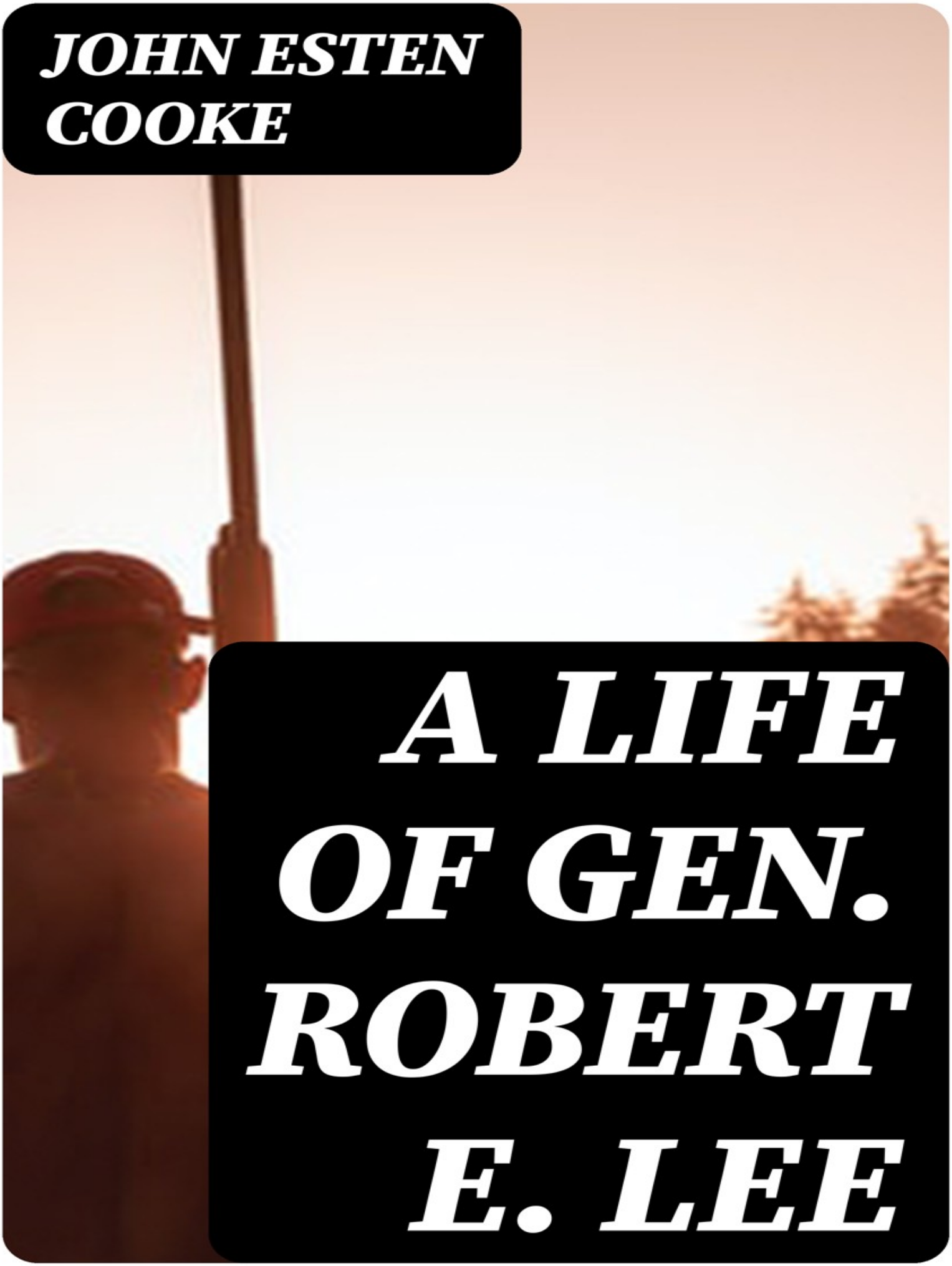
JOHN ESTEN COOKE



A LIFE OF GEN. ROBERT E. LEE

John Esten Cooke

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LEE'S EARLY LIFE,

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INTRODUCTION.

The name of Lee is beloved and respected throughout the world. Men of all parties and opinions unite in this sentiment, not only those who thought and fought with him, but those most violently opposed to his political views and career. It is natural that his own people should love and honor him as their great leader and defender in a struggle of intense bitterness—that his old enemies should share this profound regard and admiration is due solely to the character of the individual. His military genius will always be

conceded, and his figure remain a conspicuous landmark in history; but this does not account for the fact that his very enemies love the man. His private character is the origin of this sentiment. The people of the North, no less than the people of the South, feel that Lee was truly great; and the harshest critic has been able to find nothing to detract from this view of him. The soldier was great, but the man himself was greater. No one was ever simpler, truer, or more honest. Those who knew him best loved him the most. Reserved and silent, with a bearing of almost austere dignity, he impressed many persons as cold and unsympathetic, and his true character was long in revealing itself to the world. To-day all men know what his friends knew during his life—that under the grave exterior of the soldier, oppressed with care and anxiety, beat a warm and kindly heart, full of an even extraordinary gentleness and sweetness; that the man himself was not cold, or stiff, or harsh, but patient, forbearing, charitable under many trials of his equanimity, and magnanimous without effort, from the native impulse of his heart. Friend and foe thus to-day regard him with much the same sentiment, as a genuinely honest man, incapable of duplicity in thought or deed, wholly good and sincere, inspired always under all temptations by that *prisca fides* which purifies and ennobles, and resolutely bent, in the dark hour, as in the bright, on the full performance of his duty. "Duty is the sublimest word in our language," he wrote to his son; and, if we add that other august maxim, "Human virtue should be equal to human calamity," we shall have in a few words a summary of the principles which inspired Lee.

The crowning grace of this man, who was thus not only great but good, was the humility and trust in God, which lay at the foundation of his character. Upon this point we shall quote the words of a gentleman of commanding intellect, a bitter opponent of the South in the war:

"Lee is worthy of all praise. As a man, he was fearless among men. As a soldier, he had no superior and no equal. In the course of Nature my career on earth may soon terminate. God grant that, When the day of my death shall come, I may look up to Heaven with that confidence and faith which the life and character of Robert E. Lee gave him. He died trusting in God as a good man, with a good life, and a pure conscience."

He had lived, as he died, with this supreme trust in an overruling and merciful Providence; and this sentiment, pervading his whole being, was the origin of that august calmness with which he greeted the most crushing disasters of his military career. His faith and humble trust sustained him after the war, when the woes of the South wellnigh broke his great spirit; and he calmly expired, as a weary child falls asleep, knowing that its father is near.

Of this eminent soldier and man whose character offers so great an example, a memoir is attempted in this volume. The work will necessarily be "popular" rather than full and elaborate, as the public and private correspondence of Lee are not at this time accessible. These will throw a fuller light on the subject; but sufficient material is at the disposal of the writer to enable him to present an accurate likeness of Lee, and to narrate clearly the incidents of his career. In doing so, the aim of the author is to measure out full justice

to all—not to arouse old enmities, which should be allowed to slumber, but to treat his subject with the judicial moderation of the student of history.

A few words will terminate this preface. The volume before the reader was begun in 1866. The writer first, however, informed General Lee of his design, and had the honor to receive from him in reply the assurance that the work "would not interfere with any he might have in contemplation; he had not written a line of any work as yet, and might never do so; but, should he write a history of the campaigns of the Army of Northern Virginia, the proposed work would be rather an assistance than a hinderance."

As the writer had offered promptly to discontinue the work if it were not agreeable to General Lee, this reply was regarded in the light of an assurance that he did not disapprove of it. The composition was, however, interrupted, and the work laid aside. It is now resumed and completed at a time when the death of the illustrious soldier adds a new and absorbing interest to whatever is connected with his character or career.

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THE LEES OF VIRGINIA.

The Lees of Virginia spring from an ancient and respectable family of
Essex, in England.

Of some members of the family, both in the Old World and the New, a brief account will be given. The origin of an individual explains much that is striking and peculiar in his own character; and it will be found that General Lee inherited many of the traits of his ancestors, especially of some eminent personages of his name in Virginia.

The family pedigree is traced back by Lee, in the life of his father, to Launcelot Lee, of London, in France, who accompanied William the Conqueror to England. After the battle of Hastings, which subjected England to the sway of the Normans, Launcelot Lee, like others, was rewarded by lands wrested from the subdued Saxons. His estate lay in Essex, and this is all that is known concerning him. Lionel Lee is the next member of the family of whom mention is made. He lived during the reign of Richard Coeur de Lion, and, when the king went on his third crusade, in the year 1192, Lionel Lee raised a company of gentlemen, and marched with him to the Holy Land. His career there was distinguished; he displayed special gallantry at the siege of Acre, and for this he received a solid proof of King Richard's approbation. On his return he was made first Earl of Litchfield; the king presented him with the estate of "Ditchley," which became the name afterward of an estate of the Lees in Virginia; and, when he died, the armor which he had worn in the Holy Land was placed in the department of "Horse Armory" in the great Tower of London.

The name of Richard Lee is next mentioned as one of the followers of the Earl of Surrey in his expedition across the Scottish border in 1542. Two of the family about this period were "Knights Companions of the Garter," and their banners, with the Lee arms above, were suspended in St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle. The coat-of-arms was a shield "band sinister battled and embattled," the crest a closed visor surmounted by a squirrel holding a nut. The motto, which may be thought characteristic of one of General Lee's traits as a soldier, was, "*Non incautus futuri*"

Such are the brief notices given of the family in England. They seem to have been persons of high character, and often of distinction. When Richard Lee came to Virginia, and founded the family anew there, as Launcelot, the first Lee, had founded it in England, he brought over in his veins some of the best and most valiant blood of the great Norman race.

This Richard Lee, the *princeps* of the family in Virginia, was, it seems, like the rest of his kindred, strongly Cavalier in his sentiments; indeed, the Lees seem always to have been Cavalier. The reader will recall the stately old representative of the family in Scott's "Woodstock"—Sir Henry Lee of Ditchley—who is seen stalking proudly through the great apartments of the palace, in his laced doublet, slashed boots, and velvet cloak, scowling darkly at the Puritan intruders. Sir Henry was not a fanciful person, but a real individual; and the political views attributed to him were those of the Lee family, who remained faithful to the royal cause in all its hours of adversity.

It will be seen that Richard Lee, the first of the Virginia Lees, was an ardent monarchist. He came over during the reign of Charles I., but returned to England, bequeathing all his lands to his servants; he subsequently came back to Virginia, however, and lived and died there. In his will he styles himself "Richard Lee, of Strafford Langton, in the County of Essex, Esquire." It is not certainly known whether he sought refuge in Virginia after the failure of the king's cause, or was tempted to emigrate with a view to better his fortunes in the New World. Either may have been the impelling motive. Great numbers of Cavaliers "came over" after the overthrow of Charles at Naseby; but a large emigration had already taken place, and took place afterward, induced by the salubrity of the country, the ease of living, and the cheapness and fertility of the lands on the great rivers, where families impoverished or of failing fortunes in England might "make new settlements" and build on a new foundation. This would amply account for the removal of Richard Lee to Virginia, and for the ambition he seems to have been inspired with, to build and improve, without attributing to him any apprehension of probable punishment for his political course. Very many families had the first-named motives, and commenced to build great manor-houses, which were never finished, or were too costly for any one of their descendants to possess. The abolition of primogeniture, despite the opposition of Pendleton and others, overthrew all this; and the Lees, like other families, now possess few of the broad acres which their ancestors acquired.

To return, however, to Richard Lee. He had already visited Virginia in some official capacity under the royal governor, Sir William Berkeley, and had been so much pleased with the soil and climate of the country, that he, as we have said, emigrated finally, and cast his lot in the new land. He brought a number of followers and servants, and, coming over to Westmoreland County, in the Northern Neck of Virginia, "took up" extensive tracts of land there, and set about building manor-houses upon them.

Among these, it is stated, was the original "Stratford" House, afterward destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt, however, and became the birthplace of Richard Henry Lee, and afterward of General Robert E. Lee. We shall speak of it more in detail after finishing, in a few words, our notice of Richard Lee, its founder, and the founder of the Lee family in Virginia. He is described as a person of great force of character and many virtues—as "a man of good stature, comely visage, enterprising genius, sound head, vigorous spirit, and generous nature." This may be suspected to partake of the nature of epitaph; but, of his courage and energy, the proof remains in the action taken by him in connection with Charles II. Inheriting, it would seem, in full measure, the royalist and Cavalier sentiments of his family, he united with Sir William Berkeley, the royal governor, in the irregular proclamation of Charles II. in Virginia, a year or two before his reinstallment on the English throne. He had already, it is reported on the authority of well-supported tradition, made a voyage across the Atlantic to Breda, where Charles II. was then in exile, and offered to erect his standard in Virginia, and proclaim him king there. This

proposition the young monarch declined, shrinking, with excellent good sense, from a renewal, under less favorable circumstances, of the struggle which terminated at Worcester. Lee was, therefore, compelled to return without having succeeded in his enterprise; but he had made, it seems, a very strong impression in favor of Virginia upon the somewhat frivolous young monarch. When he came to his throne again, Charles II. graciously wore a coronation-robe of Virginia silk, and Virginia, who had proved so faithful to him in the hour of his need, was authorized, by royal decree, to rank thenceforward, in the British empire, with England, Scotland, and Ireland, and bear upon her shield the motto, "*En dat Virginia quartam.*"

Richard Lee returned, after his unsuccessful mission, to the Northern Neck, and addressed himself thenceforward to the management of his private fortunes and the affairs of the colony. He had now become possessed of very extensive estates between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers and elsewhere. Besides Stratford, he owned plantations called "Mocke Neck," "Mathotick," "Paper-Maker's Neck," "War Captain's Neck," "Bishop's Neck," and "Paradise," with four thousand acres besides, on the Potomac, lands in Maryland, three islands in Chesapeake Bay, an interest in several trading-vessels, and innumerable indented and other servants. He became a member of the King's Council, and lived in great elegance and comfort. That he was a man of high character, and of notable piety for an age of free living and worldly tendencies, his will shows. In that document he bequeaths his soul "to that good and gracious God that gave it me, and to my blessed Redeemer, Jesus Christ,

assuredly trusting, in and by His meritorious death and passion, to receive salvation."

The attention of the reader has been particularly called to the character and career of Richard Lee, not only because he was the founder of the family in Virginia, but because the traits of the individual reappear very prominently in the great soldier whose life is the subject of this volume. The coolness, courage, energy, and aptitude for great affairs, which marked Richard Lee in the seventeenth century, were unmistakably present in the character of Robert E. Lee in the nineteenth century.

We shall conclude our notice of the family by calling attention to that great group of celebrated men who illustrated the name in the days of the Revolution, and exhibited the family characteristics as clearly. These were Richard Henry Lee, of Chantilly, the famous orator and statesman, who moved in the American Congress the Declaration of Independence; Francis Lightfoot Lee, a scholar of elegant attainments and high literary accomplishments, who signed, with his more renowned brother, the Declaration; William Lee, who became Sheriff of London, and ably seconded the cause of the colonies; and Arthur Lee, diplomatist and representative of America abroad, where he displayed, as his diplomatic correspondence indicates, untiring energy and devotion to the interests of the colonies. The last of these brothers was Philip Ludwell Lee, whose daughter Matilda married her second cousin, General Henry Lee. This gentleman, afterward famous as "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, married a

second time, and from this union sprung the subject of this memoir.

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GENERAL "LIGHT-HORSE HARRY" LEE.

This celebrated soldier, who so largely occupied the public eye in the Revolution, is worthy of notice, both as an eminent member of the Lee family, and as the father of General Robert E. Lee.

He was born in 1756, in the county of Westmoreland—which boasts of being the birthplace of Washington, Monroe, Richard Henry Lee, General Henry Lee, and General Robert E. Lee, Presidents, statesmen, and soldiers—and, after graduating at Princeton College, entered the army, in 1776, as captain of cavalry, an arm of the service afterward adopted by his more celebrated descendant, in the United States army. He soon displayed military ability of high order, and, for the capture of Paulus's Hook, received a gold medal from Congress. In 1781 he marched with his "Legion" to join Greene in the Carolinas, carrying with him the high esteem of Washington, who had witnessed his skilful and daring operations in the Jerseys. His career in the arduous campaigns of the South against Cornwallis, and the efficient commander of his cavalry arm. Colonel Tarleton, may be

best understood from General Greene's dispatches, and from his own memoirs of the operations of the army, which are written with as much modesty as ability. From these it is apparent that the small body of the "Legion" cavalry, under its active and daring commander, was the "eye and ear" of Greene's army, whose movements it accompanied everywhere, preceding its advances and covering its retreats. Few pages of military history are more stirring than those in Lee's "Memoirs" describing Greene's retrograde movement to the Dan; and this alone, if the hard work at the Eutaws and elsewhere were left out, would place Lee's fame as a cavalry officer upon a lasting basis. The distinguished soldier under whose eye the Virginian operated did full justice to his courage and capacity. "I believe," wrote Greene, "that few officers, either in Europe or America, are held in so high a position of admiration as you are. Everybody knows I have the highest opinion of you as an officer, and you know I love you as a friend. No man, in the progress of the campaign, had equal merit with yourself." The officer who wrote those lines was not a courtier nor a diplomatist, but a blunt and honest soldier who had seen Lee's bearing in the most arduous straits, and was capable of appreciating military ability. Add Washington's expression of his "love and thanks," in a letter written in 1789, and the light in which he was regarded by his contemporaries will be understood.

His "Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department" is a valuable military history and a very interesting book. The movements of Greene in face of Cornwallis are described with a precision which renders the narrative valuable to

military students, and a picturesqueness which rivets the attention of the general reader. From these memoirs a very clear conception of the writer's character may be derived, and everywhere in them is felt the presence of a cool and dashing nature, a man gifted with the *mens aequa in arduis*, whom no reverse of fortune could cast down. The fairness and courtesy of the writer toward his opponents is an attractive characteristic of the work,[1] which is written with a simplicity and directness of style highly agreeable to readers of judgment.[2]

[Footnote 1: See his observations upon the source of his successes over Tarleton, full of the generous spirit of a great soldier. He attributes them in no degree to his own military ability, but to the superior character of his large, thorough-bred horses, which rode over Tarleton's inferior stock. He does not state that the famous "Legion" numbered only two hundred and fifty men, and that Tarleton commanded a much larger force of the best cavalry of the British army.]

[Footnote 2: A new edition of this work, preceded by a life of the author, was published by General Robert E. Lee in 1869.]

After the war General Henry Lee served a term in Congress; was then elected Governor of Virginia; returned in 1799 to Congress; and, in his oration upon the death of Washington, employed the well-known phrase, "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." He died in Georgia, in the year 1818, having made a journey thither for the benefit of his health.

General Henry Lee was married twice; first, as we have said, to his cousin Matilda, through whom he came into

possession of the old family estate of Stratford; and a second time, June 18,1793, to Miss Anne Hill Carter, a daughter of Charles Carter, Esq., of "Shirley," on James River.

The children of this second marriage were three sons and two daughters—Charles Carter, *Robert Edward*, Smith, Ann, and Mildred.

[Illustration: "STRATFORD HOUSE." The Birthplace of Gen. Lee.]

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STRATFORD.

Robert Edward Lee was born at Stratford, in Westmoreland County,
Virginia, on the 19th of January, 1807.[1]

[Footnote 1: The date of General Lee's birth has been often given incorrectly. The authority for that here adopted is the entry in the family Bible, in the handwriting of his mother.]

Before passing to Lee's public career, and the narrative of the stormy scenes of his after-life, let us pause a moment and bestow a glance upon this ancient mansion, which is still standing—a silent and melancholy relic of the past—in the remote "Northern Neck." As the birthplace of a great

man, it would demand attention; but it has other claims still, as a venerable memorial of the past and its eminent personages, one of the few remaining monuments of a state of society that has disappeared or is disappearing.

The original Stratford House is supposed, as we have said, to have been built by Richard Lee, the first of the family in the New World. Whoever may have been its founder, it was destroyed in the time of Thomas Lee, an eminent representative of the name, early in the eighteenth century. Thomas Lee was a member of the King's Council, a gentleman of great popularity; and, when it was known that his house had been burned, contributions were everywhere made to rebuild it. The Governor, the merchants of the colony, and even Queen Anne in person, united in this subscription; the house speedily rose again, at a cost of about eighty thousand dollars; and this is the edifice still standing in Westmoreland. The sum expended in its construction must not be estimated in the light of to-day. At that time the greater part of the heavy work in house-building was performed by servants of the manor; it is fair, indeed, to say that the larger part of the work thus cost nothing in money; and thus the eighty thousand dollars represented only the English brick, the carvings, furniture, and decorations.

The construction of such an edifice had at that day a distinct object. These great old manor-houses, lost in the depths of the country, were intended to become the headquarters of the family in all time. In their large apartments the eldest son was to uphold the name. Generation after generation was to pass, and some one of

the old name still live there; and though all this has passed away now, and may appear a worn-out superstition, and, though some persons may stigmatize it as contributing to the sentiment of "aristocracy," the strongest opponents of that old system may pardon in us the expression of some regret that this love of the hearthstone and old family memories should have disappeared. The great man whose character is sought to be delineated in this volume never lost to the last this home and family sentiment. He knew the kinships of every one, and loved the old country-houses of the old Virginia families—plain and honest people, attached, like himself, to the Virginia soil. We pass to a brief description of the old house in which Lee was born.

Stratford, the old home of the Lees, but to-day the property of others, stands on a picturesque bluff on the southern bank of the Potomac, and is a house of very considerable size. It is built in the form of the letter H. The walls are several feet in thickness; in the centre is a saloon thirty feet in size; and surmounting each wing is a pavilion with balustrades, above which rise clusters of chimneys. The front door is reached by a broad flight of steps, and the grounds are handsome, and variegated by the bright foliage of oaks, cedars, and maple-trees. Here and there in the extensive lawn rises a slender and ghostly old Lombardy poplar—a tree once a great favorite in Virginia, but now seen only here and there, the relic of a past generation.

Within, the Stratford House is as antique as without, and, with its halls, corridors, wainscoting, and ancient mouldings, takes the visitor back to the era of powder and silk stockings. Such was the mansion to which General Harry

Lee came to live after the Revolution, and the sight of the old home must have been dear to the soldier's heart. Here had flourished three generations of Lees, dispensing a profuse and open-handed hospitality. In each generation some one of the family had distinguished himself, and attracted the "best company" to Stratford; the old walls had rung with merriment; the great door was wide open; everybody was welcome; and one could see there a good illustration of a long-passed manner of living, which had at least the merit of being hearty, open-handed, and picturesque. General Harry Lee, the careless soldier, partook of the family tendency to hospitality; he kept open house, entertained all comers, and hence, doubtless, sprung the pecuniary embarrassments embittering an old age which his eminent public services should have rendered serene and happy.

Our notice of Stratford may appear unduly long to some readers, but it is not without a distinct reference to the subject of this volume. In this quiet old mansion—and in the very apartment where Richard Henry and Francis Lightfoot Lee first saw the light—Robert E. Lee was born. The eyes of the child fell first upon the old apartments, the great grounds, the homely scenes around the old country-house—upon the tall Lombardy poplars and the oaks, through which passed the wind bearing to his ears the murmur of the Potomac.

He left the old home of his family before it could have had any very great effect upon him, it would seem; but it is impossible to estimate these first influences, to decide the depth of the impression which the child's heart is capable of

receiving. The bright eyes of young Robert Lee must have seen much around him to interest him and shape his first views. Critics charged him with family pride sometimes; if he possessed that virtue or failing, the fact was not strange. Stratford opened before his childish eyes a memorial of the old splendor of the Lees. He saw around him old portraits, old plate, and old furniture, telling plainly of the ancient origin and high position of his family. Old parchments contained histories of the deeds of his race; old genealogical trees traced their line far back into the past; old servants, grown gray in the house, waited upon the child; and, in a corner of one of the great apartments, an old soldier, gray, too, and shattered in health, once the friend of Washington and Greene, was writing the history of the battles in which he had drawn his sword for his native land.

Amid these scenes and surroundings passed the first years of Robert E. Lee. They must have made their impression upon his character at a period when the mind takes every new influence, and grows in accordance with it; and, to the last, the man remained simple, hearty, proud, courteous—the *country Virginian* in all the texture of his character. He always rejoiced to visit the country; loved horses; was an excellent rider; was fond of plain country talk, jests, humorous anecdote, and chit-chat—was the plain country gentleman, in a word, preferring grass and trees and streams to all the cities and crowds in the world. In the last year of his life he said to a lady: "My visits to Florida and the White Sulphur have not benefited me much; but it did me good to go to the White House, and see *the mules walking round, and the corn growing*."

We notice a last result of the child's residence now, or visits afterward to the country, and the sports in which he indulged—the superb physical health and strength which remained unshaken afterward by all the hardships of war. Lee, to the last, was a marvel of sound physical development; his frame was as solid as oak, and stood the strain of exhausting marches, loss of sleep, hunger, thirst, heat, and cold, without failing him.

When he died, it was care which crushed his heart; his health was perfect.

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LEE'S EARLY MANHOOD AND CAREER IN THE UNITED STATES ARMY.

Of Lee's childhood we have no memorials, except the words of his father, long afterward.

"*Robert was always good*," wrote General Henry Lee.[1]

[Footnote 1: To C.C. Lee, February 9, 1817.]

That is all; but the words indicate much—that the good man was "always good." It will be seen that, when he went to West Point, he never received a demerit. The good boy was the good young officer, and became, in due time, the good commander-in-chief.