

GENERAL GRANT'S DES MOINES SPEECH.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF A REMARKABLE UTTERANCE.

BY JAMES S. CLARKSON.



REFERENCE to General Grant's «famous Des Moines letter,» in General Horace Porter's oration at the dedication of the Grant monument, leads me to think that the public would willingly read of the circumstances of that remarkable utterance.

The declaration of General Grant's political faith at Des Moines was not in a letter, but in a speech. In fact, it was in this speech, made on Iowa soil, that the great soldier began to find that he could talk on his feet. The occasion was on September 29, 1875, at the principal evening meeting of the reunion of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee. The place was Moore's Opera-House. General Sherman presided, and Generals Sheridan, Logan, Dodge, Howard, Pope, and other distinguished Union generals, were present on the stage. This little speech, which, like Lincoln's short speech at Gettysburg, contained so much living wisdom and enduring merit, has its own little history, part of it known probably only to me.

I was then editor of a newspaper and postmaster at Des Moines; and President Grant, in the three or four days he was in that city, used to come to the post-office to hide from the crowds of people that followed him everywhere, and to get a little rest, and to smoke. About five o'clock on the afternoon of the day this speech was delivered, he drove up suddenly to the post-office, and came direct to my room, in some way having escaped the attention of the crowds on the streets. He said: «Take me inside the post-office, where we can be out of sight, where I can get a chance to smoke, and where we can have a quiet talk.» We went inside the post-office, where there was an old-fashioned circular mailing-case, about ten feet high and thirty broad, shutting out the view from every one, and took seats on two stools; and I opened a box of cigars, and he began to smoke. He was in the chatty and reminiscent mood into which, when with one person, he so often fell. He began by talking of his boyhood, of his experiences and

hardships in the army on the Pacific coast, of his life in Missouri and his attempts at farming, and of a project he had formed with some friends to try to secure some hard-wood forests in South America, thinking it a good investment. Then he passed on to talk of education, schools, and oratory, and how unkind it seemed to be that one man had the natural gift to tell what he knew, and another could not. He said: «Now I have never had, at any time in my life, any difficulty in writing out my ideas or thoughts easily and quickly. But when I get up on my feet to speak, everything I know seems to go down into my boots.» Then a queer smile came over his face, and he began to reach down into the deep pockets of a large overcoat, or linen duster, that he had on, and to take out six or seven sheets of note-paper, on which I could see traces of writing. He held them toward me, and said: «I wish you would read these. Every time I attend these army reunions, the boys are always asking me to speak, and I never do it. This time I am going to fool them. I have had in my mind for two or three years some things I wanted to say to the American people on the public-school question. It was my intention to put them in my last annual message to Congress, but I forgot or overlooked it in some way; and it occurred to me to-day, when the subject returned to my mind, called back by the public schools I saw while riding about Des Moines, that Iowa was a good and fitting place in which to give these utterances out to the public. So a while ago I hunted up some paper in my room at Judge Cole's,» — where he and his family were guests, — «and jotted them down; and I wish you would look them over and criticize them, and make any suggestions freely.»

I accepted the opportunity to read, but not to criticize. For, as an editor, I had closely watched and carefully studied General Grant's peculiarly lucid and sententious style of expression in all that he wrote, and therefore knew in advance that, in all probability, these few ideas jotted down hastily at

Judge Cole's were likely to be memorable. As I read them, the peculiar strength of analysis in estimation of the growing importance of the public school to the republic, and the wisdom of the prophecy in warning the American people as to the perils menacing the school, and the dominant note of freedom in all things good and possible in American life sounding through it all, impressed me greatly, and I laid the straggling and crumpled little sheets together, folded them up, put them back in his hands, and said: "I have not the ability to criticize a line, a word, or breath of that speech; and I do not believe the man lives who would have the impudence even to attempt to do it." I added: "In my opinion, Mr. President, this will prove to the people of the future republic the greatest and most useful of all your utterances. It is an actual gift, not alone to the American people, but to all the world; and as a citizen of Iowa, I am proud that the name of this State is to be associated with such a great message to all the people who love liberty." He replied, as simply and quietly as though the greatness of it had become common to his thoughts: "It is a subject on which I feel deeply, and it is time public thought and public conscience were both more thoroughly aroused regarding it." Then some little changes of his own occurred to his mind, and he unfolded the little package, hunted out the sheet on which he wished to make the changes, and started to do it. Evidently he found he did not have room, and, reaching down into his pockets again, fished out another sheet of paper, not written upon at all, turned to the mailing-desk, and rapidly rewrote the whole page. He read it to me, folded up the pages once more, put them in his pocket, and said, "Now that is ready for the boys to-night and the people to-morrow."

As he was in such a delightful mood, I ventured to ask him: "Why is it, General Grant, that editors, and especially literary critics and magazine people, and indeed the public generally, refuse to believe that you were the author of your own papers in the war, and in civil life since?"

He took the cigar from his lips, and, with more animation than he had shown before, said: "It is the irony of history that all men get credit for a great deal to which they are not entitled, and as invariably are refused credit, often by their own friends even, for many things perhaps the best of all in their achievements. Now," he went on, with increasing feeling, "there was a vast deal of

credit given to me, and for many things that belonged to other men, or at least not to me. I have had papers, books, and histories written about me by the dozen, the most of them kind, much of the eulogy fulsome and overdone in praise; but so far all writers have denied to me, or failed to give me, credit for two things that I do deserve: first, that the greatest credit I was entitled to receive fairly was for my work in organizing, first the Western, and next the entire Union army." He stopped awhile, then added: "After it was so organized, and made up of such material as it was, it was not in fate for it to be defeated or conquered. Then, as to the second thing," he went on to say, "you have touched upon that—the unwillingness of the American people, and of my friends as well as the general public, to believe that I have always written my own papers. In the war, they said at first it was Rawlins who wrote them; then it was some one else—Halleck, I think; then Stanton, then others"—and he went on to name two or three other people. "But," he said with much spirit, "if the people had only thought of it, or taken the trouble to take all my papers—war despatches, letters, messages, etc.—and compare them as a whole with the writings of these other men, they would have seen at once that, while Rawlins had one style, Stanton another, and the other men still others, one style, good or bad, had run through my papers from first to last. No," he added in a reflective manner, "I cannot speak on my feet" (that was before his trip around the world, when, as in Glasgow or Edinburgh, he found his tongue, and ever after stood in the highest places with the ready grace of worthy speech); "but I have always been able to write down anything that came into my mind, and to express myself clearly."¹ Happily, he lived to see the people of his own country, and of all countries, willing to admit that he was the author of his own papers. For before he died the whole world learned to know the style in which he always spoke or wrote—a style that never had in it a false note or a clouded or double meaning, that took hold of every reader with its own masterful strength of wisdom and sincerity and kindly counsel, and that gave itself to the world in epigrams and proverbs to be treasured up for the good of men and the counsel of governments for all time.

At the meeting that evening, General

¹ The report of this conversation is from notes that I made of it, as I was then in the trained editorial habit, within an hour after it occurred.

Comrades

It always affords me much gratification to meet my old Comrades, in arms of 10-14 years ago, and to live over again the trials and hardships of those days, ^{hardships} imposed for the preservation & perpetuation of our free ^{institutions} government. We believed then, and believe now that we had a government worth fighting for, and if need be dying for. How many

Grant went upon the stage arm in arm with General Sherman. As usual, Sherman, as the presiding officer, called upon Grant for a speech; and, to the surprise of Sherman and nearly everybody else, Grant at once arose and started to the front of the stage, beginning to hunt in his pockets for his speech. He was as shy and embarrassed as a school-boy: but as his comrades and the great audience cheered him tumultuously, he started to unfold the manuscript to read it.

His hands trembled, and he dropped the scattered sheets on the stage. General Sherman and the secretaries helped to gather them up; and then he read them to the three thousand people present, half of whom found difficulty, even in the stillness of an unusual time, to hear all that he said. The newspapers carried it all over the globe the next day, and it attracted attention and commanded admiration throughout the world. Following is the text of the

speech, here copied from a facsimile of the original manuscript, as given in Professor Leonard F. Parker's monograph on «Higher Education in Iowa,» published by the National Bureau of Education in 1893:

COMRADES: It always affords me much gratification to meet my old comrades in arms of ten to fourteen years ago, and to live over again the trials and hardships of those days—hardships imposed for the preservation and perpetuation of our free institutions. We believed then, and believe now, that we had a government worth fighting for, and, if need be, dying for. How many of our comrades of those days paid the latter price for our preserved Union! Let their heroism and sacrifice be ever green in our memory. Let not the results of their sacrifice be destroyed. The Union and free institutions for which they fell should be held more dear for these sacrifices. We will not deny to any of those who fought against us any privilege under the government which we claim for ourselves. On the contrary, we welcome all such who come forward in good faith to help build up the waste places and perpetuate our institutions against all enemies, as brothers in full interest with us in a common heritage. But we are not prepared to apologize for the part we took [in] the great struggle. It is to be hoped that like trials will never befall our country. In this sentiment no class of people can more heartily join than the soldier who submitted to the dangers, trials, and hardships of the camp and the battle-field, on whichever side he may have fought. No class of people are more interested in guarding against a recurrence of those days. Let us, then, begin by guarding against every enemy threatening the perpetuity of free republican institutions. I do not bring into this assemblage politics, certainly not partizan politics; but it is a fair subject for the deliberation of soldiers to consider what may be necessary to secure the prize for which they battled. In a republic like ours, where the citizen is the sovereign and the official the servant, where no power is exercised except by the will of the people, it is important that the sovereign—the people—should possess intelligence. The free school is the promoter of that intelligence which is to preserve us as by our nation [qy.: as a nation]. If we are to have another contest in the near future of our national existence, I predict that the dividing-line will not be Mason and Dixon's, but between patriotism and intelligence on the one side, and superstition, ambition, and ignorance on the other. Now, in this centennial year of our national existence, I believe it a good time to begin the work of strengthening the foundation of the house commenced by our patriotic forefathers, one hundred years ago, at Concord and Lexington. Let us all labor to add all needful guarantees for the more perfect security of free thought, free speech, a free press, pure morals, unfettered religious sentiment, and of equal rights and privileges to all men, irrespective of nationality, color, or religion. Encourage

free schools, and resolve that not one dollar of money appropriated to their support, no matter how raised, shall be appropriated to the support of any sectarian school. Resolve that either the State or nation, or both combined, shall support institutions of learning sufficient to afford to every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good common-school education, unmixed with sectarian, pagan, or atheistical tenets. Leave the matter of religion to the family circle, the church, and the private school supported entirely by private contribution. Keep the church and state forever separate. With these safeguards, I believe the battles which created us «the Army of the Tennessee» will not have been fought in vain.

This is part of the true story of how General Grant, in 1875, «summed up his political faith» in his famous Des Moines speech. Indeed, Des Moines was honored during that session by two remarkably great speeches. For the evening after the meeting where Grant spoke, the citizens of Des Moines gave to the distinguished visitors a banquet at the Savery House, where, in responding to a toast offhand, General Sherman replied with kindling spirit and sweeping power to the criticisms of the plans of his march to the sea—a speech that was clearly impromptu, and gathered force terrifically as it went. It swept the audience with its gathering strength, and made the reporters forget their work, with the result that no report of the real speech was ever made. I can remember distinctly how, taking up one critic and his statement after another, he met them all with his own strong and complete refutation; and then, with the fire of righteous wrath blazing in his eyes, he turned about to look General Grant directly in the face, and with marvelous energy closed substantially in these words: «I want to meet these critics, and to answer them here now, and for all time, while in the presence of the only witnesses who, of all men, know all the facts, and who can and will contradict me if I have not told the truth.» There was applause, and a silence which seemed long, and that no one present will ever forget, as Sherman stood looking in Grant's face until the latter deliberately and impressively bent his head in approval of his great lieutenant's emphatic asseverations. Then Sherman, turning once more to his audience, and seeming to raise himself to a still more commanding stature, swept his left arm over in the direction of one corner of the table, as if to indicate that some of the critics might be sitting there, and ended with this one sentence, uttered in a tone of mingled contempt and victory: «Any man can march to the sea *now.*»