

THE
LIFE AND TIMES
OF
THE REV. JESSE LEE. 1758-1814

BY
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"If thou would'st reap in love,
First sow in holy fear:
So life a winter's morn may prove
To a bright endless year."—KEBLE.

"In all thy ways acknowledge Him; and He shall direct thy paths."—PROVERBS

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work of God received a new impulse; and at the Conference of 1781, the first that assembled after the healing of the breach, a nett increase of more than two thousand souls was reported as the result of God's gracious approval of their self-sacrifice and faithful diligence.

Hitherto we have considered Mr. Lee in the quiet of private life, striving, in an humble sphere, and amidst the busy engagements of his daily calling, to please God, and do good. We must now contemplate him in a new, and widely different scene; but still firm in his adhesion to Christ—fixed in his purposes to glorify God—"rooted and grounded in love" too powerful and quenchless to be lessened or perverted by the turmoils of war, or the disorders and profanity of a military encampment. He is a soldier; not of choice, but of necessity, and by constraint of military authority.

The war between Great Britain and the United States, consequent upon the Declaration of Independence in 1776, had spent most of its fury in the northern sections of the Union. An army occupied the city of Charleston, and the ravages of war were spread over the states of South Carolina and Georgia. The scene of the war was now to be changed. The English, having met with a succession of disasters in the south, commenced a retreat through North Carolina and Virginia, to concentrate their forces again in the north. To prevent this junction, and also to protect her citizens from the ravages of an invading foe, Virginia called out her militia, and sent them with the army of the south to meet the common enemy on the plains of Carolina. The history of the engagements, successes, reverses, and triumphs of the army, during the campaigns of 1780-81, belong to the national records. Our task is to follow one of the humble men, called, by the fortune of war, from the quiet of domestic life to the noisy strife of the tented field. It is the moral heroism of the Christian, rather than the military prowess of the warrior, that we are called to contemplate.

In the summer of 1780 the militia of North Carolina were drafted, and Mr. Lee was numbered among those who must share the events of the storm that was gathering over his adopted state. As a Christian, the lot placed him in a condition of great difficulty. In conscience he was opposed to fighting; yet he would not resist the civil government under which he lived. His sense of honour was

too acute and constraining to allow him to refuse to go, or to flee from the standard of his country. He would accompany the army, but he would not fight. "Thou shalt not kill," was a command too comprehensive, to his mind, to be neutralized by the call of country, or lessened in turpitude by the circumstances of war. His own words will best show the state of his mind.

"I weighed the matter over and over again, but my mind was settled; *as a Christian, and as a preacher of the gospel, I could not fight.* I could not reconcile it to myself to bear arms, or to kill one of my fellow-creatures; however, I determined to go, and to trust in the Lord; and accordingly prepared for my journey."

It was twelve days after leaving his friends, before he reached the seat of the army. The following extracts from his Journal will show the delightful spiritual frame of his feelings, and the quietness of his submission to the will and appointments of God.

"Monday, July 17th, 1780. I left home and set out for the army, and travelled about twenty-five miles to Mr. Green Hill's, where I was kindly used. I tarried there all night.

"Wednesday, the 19th. I set off early in the morning, and travelled about sixteen miles to Mr. Hines'. In the afternoon we had much conversation on spiritual matters, and in the evening, felt my heart more engaged with God in prayer than usual. I felt my dependence upon God, and though I believed that great difficulties lay before me, yet I resigned myself into the hands of God, and felt assured that he would protect and take care of me.

"I did not join the army till the 29th. On the evening of that day I came in sight of the camp, and was soon called on parade, and orders were given for all the soldiers to be furnished with guns. I then lifted up my heart to God, and besought him to take my cause into his hands, and support me in the hour of trial."

The hour of trial had indeed come. As Mr. Lee could not fight, so neither could he bear arms. He was resolved not to take the implements of death in his hands, his body should not even form a support for a gun to lean against. He proceeds with his narrative.

"The Sergeant soon came round with the guns, and offered one to me, but I would not take it. Then the Lieutenant brought me one, but I refused to take it. He said I should go under guard. He then went to the Colonel, and coming back, brought a gun and

set it down against me. I told him he had as well take it away, or it would fall. He then took me with him and delivered me to the guard.

“After awhile the Colonel came, and taking me out a little way from the guard, he began to converse with me, and to assign many reasons why I should bear arms; but his reasons were not sufficiently cogent to make any alteration in my mind. He then told the guard to take care of me, and so left me.”

However men may differ with Mr. Lee in his views of war, they must accord him honesty of principle and firmness of purpose. The whole narrative shows the presence and power of a conscience enlightened by the word, and strengthened by the grace of God. He neither shrunk from duty, nor postponed the hour of his trial. He would not compromise his feelings, nor practise a deception upon others, by taking arms that he had resolved not to bear, and conscience would not allow him to use. Nor do we perceive any impropriety of spirit in the transaction. Resolute in his purposes, he was calm in his refusal, and respectful in his deportment. The swellings of self-confidence, the boisterous independence of poorly concealed cowardice, are not seen. He who could stand firm in the presence of power, able, if willing, to crush him, unblanched beneath the gaze of a surprised, and, perhaps, scoffing multitude; must have been upborne by an influence that brings strength out of weakness, and imparts moral courage to the lowliest and least pretending of its disciples. He stood the trial; and entered the prison of the camp as composed and cheerful as he would have crossed the threshold of the Commander's pavilion.

This scene occurred near the site of the present metropolis of North Carolina. He was not alone in the guard-room. He had the company of a Christian brother—a Baptist,—who, for some unknown cause, perhaps a similar scruple, was also under guard. Nor was he without the sympathy of many in the army. He says: “Many of the people came and talked with me, and pitied me, and would leave me with tears in their eyes.” Family prayer must be held, too, even in the prison. “After dark,” he says, “I told the guard we must pray before we slept.” The Baptist brother led their devotions; and morning prayer must not be omitted: “I then told the people, if they would come out early in the morn-

ing I would pray with them." Prayer over, "the soldiers brought him straw to sleep on, and offered him their blankets and great coats for covering. He slept pretty well that night, which was the first, and the last night he was ever under guard." His soul enjoyed sweet peace during all these humiliating and exciting scenes. He writes: "I felt remarkably happy in God under all my trouble, and did not doubt but I should be delivered in due time." It was Saturday night that he spent in confinement. Sunday morning *his* prayer-meeting was to be held. We give his own account of it.

"Sunday, 30th.—As soon as it was light, I was up, and began to sing; and some hundreds of people assembled and joined with me, and we made the plantation ring with the songs of Zion. We then kneeled down and prayed; and, while I was praying, my soul was happy in God; and I wept much and prayed loud, and many of the poor soldiers also wept. I do not think I ever felt more willing to suffer for the sake of religion, than I did at that time."

"*If any man serve me, him will my Father honour.*" This is the promise of Christ. Faithfully was it performed in the case before us. The voice of Mr. Lee, in his prayer, had reached the couch of indolence, and brought tears from eyes unused to weeping. God was moving for the deliverance of his servant.

"A little after we were done praying," continues Mr. Lee, "Mr. Thomas, the tavern-keeper (near whose house the army was encamped), came out and talked with me, and told me he was in bed when he heard me praying, that he could not refrain from tears, and he had called to see me, and know if I would be willing to preach to them that day, it being the Sabbath. I told him I would preach, provided he would procure a block or something for me to stand upon; which he readily promised to do. I told him, withal, I wished him to go to the Colonel, for we had no higher officer amongst us, and obtain leave for me to preach; which he did, and liberty was granted. It is but just to state that Colonel B***** was a man of great humanity, although a profane swearer. When he heard that I was about to preach, it affected him very much; so he came and took me out to talk with me on the subject of bearing arms. I told him I could not kill a man with a good con-

science ; but I was a friend to my country, and was willing to do anything I could, while I continued in the army, except fighting. He then asked me if I would be willing to drive their baggage-wagon ? I told him I would, though I never drove a wagon before. He said their main cook was a Methodist, and could drive the wagon when we were on a march, and I might lodge and eat with him. He then released me from guard, and said, when I was ready to begin meeting, I might stand on a bench by his tent. When the hour arrived, I began, under the trees, and took my text in Luke xiii. 5 : *Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.* After I had been speaking awhile, it began to rain, and we were under the necessity of going into the house, where I resumed my discourse. I was enabled to speak plainly and without fear, and I wept while endeavouring to declare my message. Many of the people, officers as well as men, were bathed in tears before I was done. *That meeting afforded me an ample reward for all my trouble.* I felt my heart humble before God, and was truly thankful to him for the grace communicated to my soul. I had no doubt but that all things would work for my good."

It will serve as an additional illustration of the effect produced by the sermon, to state that, at the close of it, "some of the gentlemen went about with their hats to make a collection of money" for the preacher. The sight of this made him very uneasy, and he ran in among them, and begged them to desist. He did not, at that period, feel willing to receive compensation for preaching. He thought if the people could afford to *sit* and hear him, he could well afford to *stand* and preach to them. Selfishness entered not into the composition of his character ; unrestrained freedom to serve God in the ministry of reconciliation, was all he desired.

On Sunday, the 13th of August, the army remained in their encampment ; and, in the afternoon, Mr. Lee again preached to the soldiers, from Isaiah iii. 10, 11. "Many of the hearers were very solemn, and some of them wept freely under the preaching of the word." In these efforts to bring his fellow-soldiers to the knowledge of salvation, he found many to oppose, and but few to encourage him. Yet the paucity of Christians multiplied his difficulties, without lessening his responsibilities. He knew he would have to give an account of himself to God ; and he could not