

LAFAYETTE

Lafayette stands apart and alone. His spirit was unique, and his career without parallel. Although a man of another race and land, his life is a part of the heroic legend of our country and our Craft. His story is more like fiction than fact. He was the last of the old knights who, through all the foulness and folly of his time, kept a name without stain.

In all history no man of one land has been more beloved in another. He came to the aid of America like a crusader, asking to serve at his own cost, and without reward. No man ever loved Liberty with a purer devotion, or served her with more self-sending zeal. A poet, a mystic, a great-hearted gentleman, he is linked in our minds with Joan of Arc.

Even romance has few stories to match the life of Lafayette. The father of four revolutions, he is yet a figure of such grace and purity that he suggests only beautiful things. Blood and fire and terror fall away leaving only a shining spirit. Friend of America at nineteen, hero of French liberty at thirty, a tragic figure for the rest of his days, he cultivated roses and dreamed dreams in the perfumed gardens of La Grange.

The life of Lafayette falls into five acts. First, his thrilling adventures of youth in America; second, his service in the French Revolution when, for a time, he held the fate of his country in his hands; third, in the revolution of 1839 when, again, he was Master of France; fourth, his long, lonely later years; and finally, fourscore years later, when his spirit seemed to rise from the grave and beckon America to aid France in the World-War.

Yet, strangely enough, he was not a mind of the first rank. Nature had not given him ten talents; his power and charm lay in his heart. He had courage, energy, honesty, frankness, simplicity, loyalty and a flaming zeal for what he deemed high causes; a spirit so lovely, so fine, so unselfish that all who really knew him loved him with unwavering devotion. Withal, he had a generosity rare among men, and a power of admiration that knew no limit. No man was ever more beloved, and no man more richly deserved it.

Lafayette was born in Auvergne, among sturdy, thrifty folk ever ready to take up hard tasks. Nobly born, he was far nearer the farmer than the courtier. His soldier father was killed at Minden when the child was only two, and he grew up, country-bred, woman-tended, a gay, truant, poet-boy, amid forests, fields and sparkling streams. For his own good, he lacked all the social graces, being shy, gawky, red-headed, a clumsy horseman and a bad dancer. Yet always in his heart there burned a desire to go all over the world in pursuit of fame. By an odd accident was he started on the road of romance and glory. The Duke of Gloucester, in disgrace with his Royal Brother George, was passing through Metz where, at a dinner, Lafayette met him. The Duke, with the independence known only to Englishmen, made no secret of his sympathy with the American Colonies in their struggle for liberty. The young nobleman listened, and the seed fell on ready soil. As he said to Jared Sparks long years afterward, his whole soul leaped in love of America. and he vowed to offer his life and fortune in the service of its cause.

So, fitting out his ship, named "Victory," at his own expense, and gathering a few select souls like Baron de Kalb aboard, he set sail from an obscure port in Spain. Chased by the British fleet, he was as elusive as an eel, dodging all his enemies. They weighed anchor at Georgetown, South Carolina, got into a little boat and rowed up the river to a farm house that showed lights. Dogs began to bark; the family were frightened, thinking it a party of the enemy. De Kalb, who spoke English, explained who they were, and they received a hearty welcome.

Nor was the welcome ever belied. Something in the sublime effrontery of "The Boy," as he came to be known, ready to do anything, no matter how difficult, and angry only when a risk was put out of his reach by ranking etiquette; won the hearts of our people. By horseback Lafayette went to Philadelphia, and presented himself to Congress. He asked that he might serve at his own expense, and as a volunteer. It was as if a being from another planet had suddenly alighted among grave, kindly, farmer-like men. Like all the rest, they surrendered to his charm, made him a Major General, and sent him to Washington. The meeting of the two men, under a tent, is a scene for a painter. One forty-five, tall, erect, calm, direct, fifty-per-cent will, forty-nine-per-cent reason, one-per-cent chance; the other slight, poetic, eloquent and twenty. They came out of the tent arm in arm. It was the beginning of one of the great friendships of history. No two men were ever more unlike. Each had what the other lacked. They belonged together, virile power blending with fresh ardor. When Lafayette was wounded at Brandywine, shot in the leg, Washington said to the physician: "Look after him as after my son." Fidelity and tenderness united in a devotion unmarred by time, and unbroken by death.

Besides, we do not forget that they were Brothers in the Lodge. Where and when Lafayette was made a Mason is a matter of dispute. Some say it was at the great meeting of Military Lodges in Morristown, New Jersey, when the proposal was made to form a General Grand Lodge, of which Washington was to be the Supreme Grand Master. Yet, Lafayette more than one spoke as if he had been made a Mason before he arrived in America. The exact fact is hard to find, but we do know that he was a man of our Craft.

At Valley Forge, under rain and frost, amid scurvy and fever, when men ate acorns and died haphazard, "The Boy" rolled a big snow ball. Slowly, at the touch of his dreaming fingers, it took the shape of a woman. When finished, he engraved on her breast the magic word - "Liberty!" He enchanted the army, kept up its morale, and brought good luck. Spring came, the Alliance with France was celebrated, and the Army went on to Monmouth and Yorktown. When the whole British Army became prisoners of war, Lafayette wrote to his wife: "The Play is ended. The British are in the Soup!"

The years following, amid upheavals in France, need not detain us. It was a wild and stormy time. Twice, at least, Lafayette held the destiny of his country in his hands. The Queen hated him. As Napoleon said: "I could not have believed that hatred could go so far." Marat thirsted for his blood. "He was always quoting Washington," says Brissot. Time tossed him right to the height of fame, then to the depth of a dungeon, and finally aside.

Fifty years passed, and a thin old man, bent and spent, landed stiffly at New York, wondering whether he could "get a hack to take him to the hotel." No man, except Lindberg, ever received such a welcome on our shores. Rockets soared. Bonfires reddened the sky. Militia marched.

Arches crossed the road. His tour was an ovation. He was a link with our heroic past, a living legend. Walking slowly over the ground where he had galloped and waved his sword fifty years before, he was a symbol.

To this day the name of Lafayette is a magic word among us. He came to our country - a friend, a knight errant - in an hour of its struggle as black as the night on which he landed. He was young, he was romantic, with bright airs and graces. He dazzled, charmed, and captivated our nation. Enthusiasm shone in his eyes. He wanted nothing - except to fight for Liberty, the goddess of his idolatry. He was as one following a vision, in quest of a Holy Grail - the triumph of the rights of man. He went away, and when he returned it was as if our own heroic past had returned to bless and purify us. Liberty was the religion of Lafayette, and his faith remained undivided and unshaken. With all his grace of soul, he was well nigh a fanatic in its service. When he said that the happiest day of his life would be when he mounted the scaffold for his faith, he did not exaggerate. A soldier of the order of poets, his life had a purity as amazing as its unity. Ardent and serious, yet gay and gallant, he is of such stuff as legends are made of.

If men see after death what passes here below, what must have been the feelings of Lafayette when, fourscore and three years after his bodily death, he looked down from his home in the celestial habitations and saw France again in dire danger, sorely pressed by foreign foes, fighting for her life, and a general in an American uniform standing by his grave in the cemetery of Picpus, and heard him say:

"Lafayette, we are here!"

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