The Humanity of Grant, by Mrs. Jefferson Davis

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The New York Sunday World newspaper had numerous sections, each paged separately. The section containing this article was in the section titled Sunday News Magazine, p. 6. Because of the awkwardness of microfilm and the separate paging of the sections, it is not easy to locate this specific article on the microfilmed issues of the newspaper, but recently I was able to accomplish this.

Here is the article by Varina Howell Davis

I have been invited to write a notice of Gen. Grant. As I never saw him, any opinion expressed of him would deserve no especial consideration, still I hazard one in order to record the grateful sense which Mr. Davis and I always retained of his courtesy when it was a scant commodity for us in Washington.

When the nerves of my husband’s eyes became so acutely sensitive from the over-stimulation of a bright light kept before them for over a year throughout every night, and the deprivation of sleep caused by the unavoidable noises of the sentries and in the guard-room, threatened blindness and nervous collapse, I went to Washington to seek from the sympathy of the President the relief which had been denied by Mr. Davis’s jailer.

Checked by President Johnson: Courteously Aided by Grant:

I had no previous education as supplicant, and my maiden effort was roughly checked by President Johnson. I then wrote to General Grant asking for an interview, in which he offered his services to me if there was any manner in which he could aid me.

The President, however, kept me waiting so long after the hour he had appointed that the time Gen. Grant specified had expired before I could present myself at his office, and thus I was unable to avail of his kindness, but he left his aide to explain that after awaiting me an hour, a prior engagement had unavoidably postponed our meeting, but that he would gladly serve me in any way in his power.

Subsequently by the help of an old friend in the Senate, my purpose was accomplished, and I left so hurriedly that I did not again apply for Gen. Grant’s aid, but heard that he used his influence in Mr. Davis’s interest in several directions. This is all I personally know of Gen. Grant, but many things I have heard of him have impressed me most favorably.

Grant’s Courtesy to Gen. Lee at Appomattox:

The loving memory in which he is held by his wife and by all those dependent on him, his courtesy to Gen. Lee at the surrender of our army, have convinced me of his kind heart and unwillingness to inflict needless pain.

The character of a great man cannot be fairly portrayed by a contemporary. The prejudices of environment and contact are too fresh for an unbiased judgment. The historians of his own day
can only perpetuate testimony, as a surveyor makes his little chart of the acres he has measured, which will hereafter serve with many others from different initial points for the groundwork of the comprehensive physical geography of the world, where the mountain ranges and the inland seas show only the results of nature’s upheavals.

Confederate women who like myself had a life or death stake in the success of our struggle knew Gen. Grant only as the Northern general who threw with relentless force and never-flagging energy the masses of his armed hordes against our half-starved worn-out little army, to whose depleted ranks we had not a man to add. Our great captain, Lee, whose self-sacrifice and military genius were equal to any emergency where these could avail anything, we knew must yield eventually to the impasse of overwhelming numbers guided by military training and an invincible purpose.

“Let Them Keep Their Horses,” The Terms of Surrender:

This was all we praying, desperate, but undaunted, women knew of Gen. Grant then. When, however, our little army had fought, as Gen. Gordon picturesquely said, “to a frazzle,” and Lee and his generals saw that mortal men could do no more, and that surrender, though worse than death, had become a necessity, then Gen. Grant’s humanity and manly sympathy manifested themselves. When our army laid down its arms he surrendered his animosities, and the South felt to the core of its great aching heart the care he exhibited for her desolate, impoverished people.

The heart of the man was with his agonized foemen when he said of the paroled Confederates, “Let them keep their horses; they will need them to cultivate their farms.” His respectful conduct to Gen. Lee when his sympathy for him was so evident as to touch all those present elicited the admiration of both contestants.

A soldier might well have forgotten all but the desire to possess the sword of Lee, that precious symbol of the knighthood of the nineteenth century. Gen. Grant did not keep it “as a trophy,” but respectfully returned it to the hand which had made its fame as deathless as that of Excalibur. It is that scene which most forcibly recalls to me—Fair as the earliest beam of Easter’s light shine martial faith and courtesy’s bright star, through all the wreckful storms that cloud the brow of war.

In Gen. Grant’s simple, direct, silent way he was following the dictates of his heart. He could never have been one of the world’s great talkers, but in this case the silence was golden.

Said He Would Resign if Lee was Arrested:

When later some of the non-combatants during the war, who are usually the most fecund in devising pains and penalties for the vanquished, proposed to have Gen. Lee arrested and imprisoned. Gen. Grant announced that he would give up his commission if Gen. Lee was arrested, covered as Lee was by the terms of the surrender at Appomattox.
None knew better than he that the public mind was inflamed by the assassination of Mr. Lincoln, then falsely attributed to Confederate influence, and he was perfectly aware that by his resistance to the arrest of Gen. Lee he braved public censure and risked the popularity which afterward seated him in the Presidential chair. Some said he threatened to “break his sword,” but Gen. Grant appears to me never to have been verbally tragic or forensic, and I cannot believe this.

Mrs. Grant told me that when he was in command in Vicksburg his ear was always open to appeals from the destitute citizens; that it was only necessary for her to state a case of distress for Gen. Grant to set about relieving or rectifying it.

When our discouraged troops were evacuating Vicksburg, after performing prodigies of valor without avail, it was Gen. Grant who gave the order: “instruct the commands to be orderly and quiet as these prisoners pass, to make no offensive remarks.”

Gen. Grant’s animus was shown in his modest commentary. “I hope I have always treated those who were not on the same side with me, both in the field and in politics, with justice.”

So, even in the stress and heat of hostilities, military and political, the humanity of the man shone through the soldier’s coat of mail.

**An Anecdote From Mrs. Grant About Her Husband:**

Perhaps it is hardly delicate for me to repeat an anecdote told me by Mrs. Grant, yet it speaks such volumes for him as a tender husband that I yield to the temptation and give it with an apology to her for violating her confidence. She suffered more or less all her life from an astigmatism at which she was very anxious to be relieved, and when he found out her intention to submit to a surgical operation, fearing she would suffer pain, he said, “Those are the eyes I have so long loved; keep them as they are.”

**No words can express the sympathy that the little quiet household of Beauvoir House felt in the heroic, gentle sufferer of Mount McGregor. Mr. Davis looked first at the daily column which told of his condition, and when a report of his increasing weakness was telegraphed, he said: “Poor sufferer; I would give him comfort and ease if I could. I hope he will live to finish his book. I believe he will tell the truth as he sees it.”**

General Grant seems never to have given offense by self-assertion or vanity, and I have been told he had a great fund of quiet humor unmixed with the strain of satire which usually accompanies it.

About thirteen years ago he went by invitation to New Orleans, and when the street arabs heard who had arrived they threw pebbles at his carriage. One of the gentlemen who formed his escort tried to conceal it by commenting on the idle habits boys have of throwing stones.

Gen. Grant answered with a quizzical smile. “It looks as if they were throwing at me, does it not?”
Everyone who met him in New Orleans conceived a favorable opinion of his kindly nature.

The Softening Memories of Sectional Strife:

Forty years have passed away since the first gun was fired in the war between the States. To unborn generations the armies hurled against each other for four tragic yet glorious years will be only a proud though ghostly memory by both sections as a splendid testimonial to the valor of American arms. They will turn to the soldiers of the South and North with a just pride in their achievements and mete out unstinted praise where it was deserved, but this day has not yet dawned upon us, I fear.

The rank and file of our people have adhered to their construction of our rights under the constitutional union. They do not forget their wrongs, but I thank God they have laid down on the altar of our common country’s good the bitter passions engendered by our Titanic struggle. Our rights are in abeyance because we are not strong enough to maintain them, and it only remains for us to do the best for our country under the conditions which the Ruler of the world in His wisdom allowed to prevail.

Nevertheless, bitter prejudices and resentments have been much modified by intercourse, the intermarriage and the inter-education of the people of the two sections. The feeling now entertained by the South for Gen. Grant is not the least significant of this fact.

That a great newspaper has asked a Southern woman to write of Gen. Grant, one whose tenderest sympathies, dearest hopes and loftiest pride are centered in the fate of her own beloved people, the men whom her husband led with prayerful certainty that for their just cause the future contained “no such word as fail,” shows an astounding change of sentiment in both sections.

I hope there are people both North and South who are already looking above and through the smoke of battle to take the just measure of the statesmen and commanders who have left their fame unclouded by atrocities committed upon the helpless who fell into their power, and in this galaxy I think Gen. Grant will take his place unquestioned by his former antagonists.