Thin Ice Beneath American Heroes' Feet

General Pershing, Like Washington, Wary of Word and Deed, and Some Returned Warriors Who Have Become Fallen Idols to a Fickle Public

By REMSEN CRAWFORD.

I FEEL a deep and peculiar pity for the heroes of today. Their fame is not secure. They were not permitted to die with their boots on. They must stack up against the caprices of a fickle world, a game in which a great man has more to lose and less to gain than the unknown fellow who lives over the creek, unhonored and unsung."

Clearly, these sentences were not taken from the musings of Washington Irving in Westminster Abbey, though their tone suggests his lamentations amid those gilded vaults, those "gloomy mansions of death."

No, the sentiments just quoted were spoken by a former Sheriff of Deadwood, S. D., a visitor in New York, commenting upon the nation's impulsive ovations to home-coming warriors.

"The trouble with heroes," he continued, pulling his ponderous pearl-gray hat convincingly down over his ruddy and rotund face, "seems to be that few of them are permitted to die at the right time. Martyrdom is the only safe road to immortal fame. Idolatry is the parent of reproach. Cheers today; jeers tomorrow. Lucky the hero that's left on the field. He is spared the flings of the faultfinder. A dog never bites a dead buck."

Philosophy from the plains of the Golden West was ever rude and rough-shod, but this former Sheriff from Deadwood is sustained by the records of the past when he makes timely the trite old saying that "republics are ungrateful." Anxiety and suspense lest they may say something in an unguarded moment or do something under the stress of extraordinary felicity and elation that would turn praise to disapproval are the modern penalties of greatness. Listen to the words of General Pershing the other day when drawn up before a battalion of newspaper reporters:

"What has been my heart's greatest desire today? Well, I must say that they would cease making a hero out of me and make me again the plain citizen that I used to be, free to go and come, and do as I please."

Even when asked for his estimate of Generalissimo Foch, the American hero hesitated, clinched his lips, and finally said only this:

"General Foch is a great strategist." Then, hesitating again, he added with ill-concealed repression: "I think that covers it!"

General George Washington came near being made the scapegoat of American history by a movement on the part of some of his officers to have him made "King" of the Colonies. In the heyday of his glory that one word came near crowning him with the cap of a clown. Shades of Robert Morris and Daniel D. Tompkins can speak eloquently of the ingratitude of republics. So vexatious was the tempest of partisanship in Lincoln's day that his Gettysburg speech, now treasured with the gems of English in the libraries of the world, was termed by a hostile press "mere vaporings of a sentimentalist." General Grant was abused for "kow-towing to crowned heads."

Admiral Dewey was acclaimed the hero of Manila with such a fervor of hero-worship as the world has rarely seen, and a few days later his name was hissed because he gave to his wife a house the worshippers had given him. Captain J. B. Coghlan, whose ship fired the first and the last shots at Manila, was hailed as hero only to be reprimanded for reciting a poem "Hoch der Kaiser," and telling with pride how Dewey had defied a German Admiral in blockading Manila Harbor. Sampson and Schley both lost their laurels in a popular dispute as to who was who at Santiago. Secretary of War Alger's name was linked with "embalmed beef" and he resigned. The record is incontestable: It is a risky, a frightful, an awful thing to be called "hero."

It was a Major in General Washington's army that took the lead in starting a boom for the "Father of His Country" as "King." Circumspect in all moments, General Washington saw the ruin of his fame even in the season of victory if the matter should be circulated only in his army. He immediately silenced the Major by sending him a note saying that he was puzzled to think what part of his conduct had ever impressed the Major with the fancy that he would listen to such a proposition. "Let me conjure you, then," wrote Washington, "if you have any regard for your country, concern for yourself or posterity, or respect for me, to banish these thoughts from your mind, and never communicate, as from yourself or any one else, a sentiment of like nature."

After saying farewell to most of his troops at Newburg, N. Y., General Washington entered New York City on Nov. 25, 1783, the day that Sir Carlton received orders to evacuate. He had only a small force with him, and when he bade adieu to his officers on Dec. 4 the ceremonies were simple and marked by "tears of manly sensibility." Without much hurrah, Washington proceeded to Annapolis, Md., where Congress was in session, to surrender his commission. This he did on Dec. 23, 1783, in very few words.

"Having now finished the work assigned me," he said, "I retire from the great theatre of action, and, bidding an affectionate farewell to this august body, under whose orders I have so long acted,

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I here offer my commission and take leave of all the employments of public life."

General Washington left Annapolis the next day for his farm at Mount Vernon. He had always been very careful not to lend himself to the spirit of hero-worship, and, from many of his utterances, it must be concluded that much of his caution and reserve was due to his knowledge of the mutability of public sentiment. When John Adams of Massachusetts had first mentioned his name in connection with the Generalship of the army, Washington arose and left the room where the Second Congress was being held in 1775. When Thomas Johnson of Maryland nominated him Commander in Chief and he was elected, this is what George Washington said:

"Lest some unlucky event should happen unfavorable to my reputation, I beg it may be remembered by every gentleman in the room that I, this day declare, with the utmost sincerity, I do not think myself equal to this command."

His salary was fixed at $500 per month with expenses, but he said that he would only ask that his expenses be paid.

Few men did so much in the war of 1812 to preserve the nation as Daniel D. Tompkins, who was Governor of New York from 1807 to 1817, and Vice President of the United States from 1817 to 1825, and yet this man died in pathetic obscurity on Staten Island, his last days being made all the more miserable by fits of melancholy. When the United States Bank had gone out of business, and shrewd financiers were planning to charter another financial system, and did capture the Legislature at Albany, Tompkins was Governor. On March 27, 1812, he prorogued the Legislature, thereby delaying their scheme, and for this he was called "tyrant," "despot," "usurper of the people's liberties," and other names less endearing.

When New York was bankrupt and could not support its army in the war of 1812, and New England was lukewarm in its participation, it may be said the darkest period of American history was approaching. Tompkins staked his private fortune, and begged his closest friends to do likewise, so that the Empire State of the new Republic might do its part. He never was paid back what was due him, and had it not been for President Madison's personal favor he might not have received anything at the hands of Congress. De Witt Clinton charged that he was a defaulter. His name is little spoken today in patriotic conversation, and the brave lads of the navy perhaps never think while casting anchor off Tompkinsville, S. I., that the name of the town is the one feeble memorial to a man who gave his last cent and died poor to save the Republic in the war of 1812.

But perhaps the most glaring of all instances of American fickleness was the treatment of Admiral George Dewey.

With quite decent regard for accuracy, it may be stated that no man in the history of America was ever acclaimed with such splendid manifestations of popular worship. He had played his part in the history of civilization, and the nation was at his feet. With penny subscriptions little children had raised a snug sum of money and bought him a house at Washington.

In a hasty impulse of affection for his bride, he committed the ill-considered act of deeding the house to her. That was enough! A tide of national indignation was set surging which hurled insult and abuse unspeakable upon the man the populace had called immortal. The poor man had even ventured to ask for the Presidency. "Don't elect Dewey President," shouted the comedians of the stage, "he would give the White House to his wife," and the audiences from San Francisco to New York hissed his very name. Finally, he gave out this statement to the newspapers from the threshold that had been so lately given to him in his glad hour of joyous homecoming:

"When I made over this house to my wife, I thought I was doing the most gracious act that an American gentleman could do. I thought the people had given me this house to dispose of as I chose. It seems I was mistaken."

The intrepid hero of Manila was again weeping, but not from joy as he had done on the day of his overwhelming welcome home. With tears of despair he continued, after a moment's pause:

"I would never have believed it possible that the American people who made such a hero of me two months ago could have in this brief period so turned upon me as to fill columns of the papers with the worst sort of abuse. When I landed in New York I was told that I was the hero, the idol of the nation. I asked no idolatry. I asked no applause. I had merely done my duty and was ready to do it again. If I had known how much trouble, how much abuse was to come upon me as the result of accepting this house I would never have taken it at the hands of the American people. I am hurt. I am cut to the quick. I have never felt so badly in all my life. I hardly feel like living in a country where I can be attacked in so outrageous a manner. But for my country, I could wish that I had never fought the battle of Manila."

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