

1. The Best Confederate Generals

General Robert E. Lee, sporting a tongue-in-cheek attitude, informed Georgia's B. H. Hill about the Confederacy's best generals.

We made a great mistake, Mr. Hill, in the beginning of our struggle, and I fear in spite of all we can do, it will prove to be a fatal mistake. . . . Why, sir, in the beginning we appointed all our worst generals to command the armies, and all our best generals to . . . [do something else]. As you know, I have planned some campaigns and quite a number of battles. I have given the work all the care and thought I could, and sometimes, when my plans were completed, as far as I could see, they seemed to be perfect. But when I have fought them through, I have discovered defects and occasionally wondered [why] I did not see some of the defects in advance. When it was all over, I found by reading a newspaper that these best editor generals saw all the defects plainly from the start. Unfortunately, they did not communicate their knowledge to me until it was too late. . . . I have no ambition but to serve the Confederacy, and do all I can to win our independence. I am willing to serve in any capacity to which the authorities may assign me. I have done the best I could in the field, and have not succeeded as I could wish. I am willing to yield my place to these best generals, and I will do my best for the cause editing the newspaper.¹

2. A New Way to Fast

Lee's religious views on fasting were more practical than traditional. "Discussing Lent, he said: 'The best way for most of us is to fast from our sins and to eat what is good for us.'"²

3. Fire Power

While Lee was president of Washington College, an explosive incident prompted his attention. After the new term opened, four

students rented a campus room, which they used between class lectures. According to one of them, they used the room to stay warm; each would take his turn in purchasing a new supply of wood when it was needed. The wood was then cut into short lengths and stacked in a corner. The winter was cold with snow remaining "on the ground" for eleven straight weeks. It was Graham's time to purchase a new load of wood; soon the four noticed that the wood was disappearing at an alarming rate; so they naturally believed that someone was stealing it. With the school's wood stacked some two hundred feet from their room, and the janitor not being very industrious, Graham became even more suspicious and decided to set a trap for the wood thief. So, he chose a log, drilled a hole in it, and then filled the hole with gunpowder; finally he covered the hole with clay. Then Graham placed it on their woodpile and warned the others not to put that log in the stove. The next day, there was a loud explosion in Dr. J's room; his stove was blown apart, and the building was set on fire.

All of this activity created a commotion on campus. Before starting the chapel service, General Lee reminded the students that the faculty had set no rules for the student body and that each individual was assumed to be a gentleman. Lee also reminded the student body that their "honor" was to "control" what went on in campus life. The General allowed that he was willing to speak with anyone who knew details of the explosion. Graham was sure that it was his powdered log that had caused the blast. So late that morning, Graham and one of his partners journeyed to President Lee's office. When they went in to see General Lee, Graham told him about their plan to catch the thief. Then he bemoaned the fact that he had no idea there was any connection with the missing wood and Prof. J's room. Seldom had Graham's partner seen the General "laugh," yet Lee gently admonished, "Well, Mr. Graham, your plan to find out who was taking your wood was a good one, but your powder charge was too heavy." Lee urged Graham not to use as much powder the next time.³

4. True History

Lexington, Va. September 26, 1866 . . .

Dear Sir: I return to you my thanks for the compliment paid

me by your proposition to write a history of my life. It is a hazardous undertaking to publish the life of any one while living, and there are but few who would desire to read a *true* history of themselves. Independently of a few national events with which mine has been connected, it presents little to interest the general reader. . . .

Very respectfully, R. E. Lee⁴

5. Ask Caesar

A Washington College faculty member gave the following example of how Lee uniquely answered one letter from a medium.

[Lee] was always an agreeable companion. There was a good deal of bonhomie and pleasantry in his conversation. He was not exactly witty, nor was he very humorous, though he gave a light turn to table-talk and enjoyed exceedingly any pleasantry or fun, even. He often made a quaint or slightly caustic remark, but took care that it should not be too trenchant. On reading his letters one discovers this playful spirit in many of them, as, for instance, in his letter to the spiritualist who asked his opinion of Von Moltke and the French war. [Lee] wrote in reply a most courteous letter in which he said that “the question was one about which military critics would differ, that [my] own judgment about such matters was poor at best, and that inasmuch as [spiritualists] had the power to consult (through their mediums) Caesar, Alexander, Napoleon, Wellington, and all of the other great captains who had ever lived, [I] could not think of obtruding [my] opinion in such company.”⁵

6. He’s No Little Shaver

Since it was difficult to work during the winter, Robert E. Lee and his growing family stayed at Arlington, their family home in Virginia, across the Potomac River from Washington, DC. However, he returned to New York in early 1843 and tried to make speedy repairs because it seemed that Congress might cut funds for these efforts. His wife also went to New York but came back to Arlington that fall

to deliver her sixth child. The little boy, born on October 27, 1843, was named after his father. Lee described him to a friend in St. Louis: "He has a fine long nose like his father, but no whiskers."⁶

7. Lee with His Children

Lee, most dignified in public, was more relaxed at home. His son Robert, Jr., recalled:

[I]t pleased and delighted [my father] to take off his slippers and place his feet in our laps. . . . Often, as little things, after romping all day, the enforced sitting would be too much for us, and our drowsiness would soon show itself in continued nods. Then, to arouse us, he had a way of stirring us up with his foot laughing heartily at and with us. He would often tell us the most delightful stories, and then there was no nodding. Sometimes, however, our interest in his wonderful tales became so engrossing that we would forget to do our duty when he would declare, "No tickling, no story!"⁷

8. Brandy, Anyone?

One of Lee's officers related:

With all his grandeur of character, his simplicity was almost childlike, and his relish of a joke hearty. To illustrate this, our old friend, Mrs. F., living about a mile from our headquarters, sent me one day a demijohn of buttermilk, which, knowing his fondness for it, I directed Bryan, our factotum, to take to the General's tent, with Mrs. F.'s compliments. At twelve o'clock, our usual lunch hour, the General had the demijohn brought out and put on the table with drinking-vessels, and then summoned the gentlemen of his staff. Seeing a *demijohn*, all imagined it to be a present of fine old Brandy or wine, of which rarity we were invited to partake, especially when the General ceremoniously said to the servant, "Bryan, help the gentlemen, Colonel—first . . ." (who he knew never drank buttermilk . . .). The eager expectation visible in each countenance was as much enjoyed

by the General, as was the disappointment expressed when each tasted his cup; the wry faces made by some of the guests provoking a hearty laugh from the host.⁸

9. His Popular Hat

During the few times Lee traveled extensively after the war, he was often confronted by crowds of admirers and onlookers. As was the respectful custom, he would raise his hat above his head to salute the crowd. Returning from one such trip, the celebrity kidded with his daughter: “[T]hey would make too much fuss over the old rebel.” A few days after he came home, one of his daughters remonstrated with him about the hat he was wearing. He replied: ‘You don’t like this hat? Why, I have seen a whole cityful [*sic*] come out to admire it.’”⁹

10. A Bridal Party Prank

The young-married Lee was stimulated by Washington, DC’s social life. He recorded for his friends, the Talcotts, that he had returned to a state of youthfulness. What had done the trick? Not only had his brother Smith just married, but Lee had also attended a bridal party the previous evening. That is what he wanted to tell Mrs. Talcott about in particular. He wrote

that my Spirits were so buoyant last night, when relieved from the eyes of my Dame, that my Sister [in-law] Nanie was trying to pass me off as her spouse, but I was not going to have my sport spoiled that way, [so I] undeceived [*sic*] the young ladies and told them I was her younger brother. Sweet, innocent things, they concluded I was single and I have not had such soft looks and tender pressure of the hand for many years.¹⁰

11. Top Hat: A Teapot Warmer

According to Mrs. Cornelius McDonald who frequently saw Lee in public, he always acted in a “courteous and elegant” way, and there seemed to be “a sort of unapproachable majesty about him.”

However, one day Mrs. Susan P. Lee, his relative by marriage, saw another side of the man. General Lee received a lot of gifts. Two of these were “an afghan and teapot warmer shaped like an ancient helmet.” With his daughter at the piano, Lee, the Southern icon, waltzed “into the room” sporting the teapot warmer on his head and bearing the afghan on his shoulders. Startled by the old warrior’s performance, Susan quickly left the house and told others about the General’s unexpected behavior.¹¹

12. Jeb’s Music

Lee constantly tried to keep his troops’ morale as high as possible, especially the morale of those closest to him. He enjoyed jesting at meals and even during his inspections. One day during the fall of 1862, Lee could hear Sweeny, Jeb Stuart’s well-known banjoist, entertaining a group of troops near his tent. When Lee came out to express his gratitude for the merriment, he noticed a jug of liquor and inquired dryly: “Gentlemen . . . am I to thank General Stuart or the jug for this fine music?”¹²

13. “Come In, Captain”

Lee did not allow the formation of an honor battalion because he was certain that the new unit would not be able to hold every man who was worthy of such distinction. Also, to each lowly private who wanted to speak with him, he was willing to grant an audience. On one particular day, he beckoned a private into his tent by calling him “Captain.” Lee urged him to take a seat, but the private answered that he was not a captain. Then Lee repeated: “Come in sir . . . come in and take a seat. You ought to be a captain.” Many years later, that private noted the sound confidence that Lee’s soldiers had in him—such confidence that they would follow him anywhere.¹³

14. Prayers

A preacher at the college chapel services habitually prayed so long that his prayers extended into the time allotted for first-period lectures. So in an ironic yet practical way, Lee asked one of his

professors: “Would it be wrong for me to suggest that he confine his morning prayers to us poor sinners at the college?” Lee felt that the preacher could pray for all of the various people around the world “some other time?”¹⁴

15. A Honeymoon or a Wake?

Robert E. Lee and his wife were unable to attend the wedding of one of Lee’s closest friends. So they wrote congratulatory responses. Lee, with a light-and-easy attitude, wrote that he and his wife had wanted to attend the wedding, but their invitation arrived too late.¹⁵ Then Lee seasoned his letter with a jolly statement to the new husband by branding him “Gilderoy,” a thief, since he had apparently stolen Lee’s old-time friend, the new bride Eliza Mackay.¹⁶ Lee then compared marriage ceremonies with funerals and asked about the couple’s honeymoon. Lee’s wife then attached a more sober note of congratulations to the end of her husband’s joyous letter.¹⁷

16. Not Kissable

During the war the Lees had no permanent home. So the Caskie family invited Lee’s wife and daughters to live with them. Mr. Caskie, who was wealthy as a result of his activities in the tobacco industry, offered to aid Lee with any personal business. The Caskies had only one child, a daughter named Norvell, who was magnetic, with an uplifting spirit and a sharp mind, both of which soon attracted Lee’s attention. This new friendship helped him regain his normal sense of humor suppressed by the recent death of his daughter. After he arrived at Culpeper, he started writing to Norvell. To his wife he soon wrote again with his normal lighthearted tendencies. In one such letter, he instructed Mary: “Tell Miss [Norvell] that I have scanned Major T. & T.’s faces with anxiety but they will not answer for my purpose. I could find nothing kissable in them.” Lee jokingly admitted that he may not have looked at the men in the proper manner; however, he did send further instructions for Norvell not to recommend them again because when he compared her with them, it caused a revolution in nature! Lee, as a younger-married man, had once pretended to be a bachelor in order to receive attention from some belles at a party.

Though he had departed from such antics, he still liked the attention of pretty women, especially at social occasions. At such times, they would cluster around him, grab his hand gently, and listen joyously at his stories. He was most happy on such occasions and liked having the fatherly right to kiss these young ladies, many of whom he knew as toddlers. Once, when he was riding down Franklin Street in Richmond, he saw his daughter Mary besieged by an amorous lad. Lee noticed immediately that she was not interested in the boy's attention. So he stopped his horse, got off, walked up to Mary, and taunted the young man by giving her a kiss and then asking him if he would like to do what Lee had just done.¹⁸

17. Can't Spare It!

A rumor reached Richmond that Major Heros von Borcke had become a fatality during the battle of Chancellorsville. Actually, he was alive and still fighting for the Confederacy. When Virginia's governor asked Lee to send von Borcke's body to Richmond, Lee replied: "Can't spare it! It's in pursuit of [Union cavalry general George] Stoneman."¹⁹

18. A "Lie"

The day after the battle of Second Manassas (Bull Run), Lee was with his staff when they chanced upon a sergeant who had scavenged a pair of shoes from a dead Union soldier. Lee confronted the sergeant by asking him why he was separated from his unit. The soldier, who did not recognize General Lee, barked out that it was a personal matter. Then Lee accused the man of straggling and said that he deserved to be heartily punished. The sergeant retorted that he was not straggling and had left his unit only shortly before to find some shoes; he also explained that he had fought in the previous day's battle where he noticed that Lee, and other cavalymen, had not been ready to charge the enemy once they had been put to flight. He turned the tables on Lee and accused him of laying back among the trees on the day of the battle instead of fighting. He also browbeat the General by accusing him of coming out, on the day after the battle, only because the

danger had finally passed. Lee was speechless but surely laughing gently as he left the scene. One of the nearby officers then asked the sergeant if he knew who the man was that he had been speaking to. The sergeant said that he had been speaking to some cowardly Virginian. Then the officer pointed out that the sergeant had not been speaking to a coward but instead to General Robert E. Lee. The startled sergeant sputtered: "General Lee, did you say? . . . Scissors to grind, I'm a goner!" Then he took off in a hurry.²⁰

19. Contagion

One afternoon two little girls, the daughters of two of his [college] professors, were riding on a gentle old horse up and down one of the back streets of [Lexington] . . . fearing to go far from home. The General, starting out on his afternoon ride, came up with them, knowing them well, said gaily:

"Come with me, little girls, and I will show you a beautiful ride." Only too delighted, they consented to go. He took them out beyond the fairgrounds, from which point there is one of the grandest stretches of mountain scenery in the world. One of the little maidens had her face tied up, as she was just recovering from the mumps. He pretended that he was much alarmed lest his horse should catch them from her, and kept saying: "I hope you won't give Traveller the mumps."²¹

20. Nauseous Water

At the springs where Lee was vacationing, two gentlemen from England would always walk with him around the place. Though he was fond of the English, Lee did not like this constant display of "hero worship" that proved "embarrassing." Later, the prankster Lee explained to a friend how he taught these two interlopers a lesson—how he got even with them. When the two met with him for his stroll, he would escort them "to the springs" and encourage them to imbibe the water, but not just any water. He said: "They are too polite to refuse when I hand them the glasses, and I fill them up with the nauseous water, and thus have my revenge."²²

21. Lee Was Hit, but Not Hurt

During the winter of 1862-63, the esprit de corps of Lee's army should have been at its lowest ebb due to a lack of supplies and an abundance of freezing weather. Still, Lee was confident that his army's morale was as high as it had ever been. Near the end of January, with a blanket of deep snow spread across the ground, his troops fought a battle among themselves using frozen snowballs as ammunition! Thousands on each side waged this cold war. Even high-ranking officers spurred their men on in this spontaneous affair; these officers were not exempt from becoming casualties as they rode along lines of battle stretching for miles. The snowballs were often heaved so hard that their impact could spill blood or even break a limb. One particular day, General Evander McIvor Law's brigade traveled three miles to fight General Micah Jenkins's men who had depleted their stockpile of ammunition. Though the next day, Jenkins's men retaliated. Up early, bent on settling the score, and carrying a fresh supply of snowballs, they sneaked an attack on Law's men preparing to eat. With the sound of "who-who-ey! who-who-ey," Law's troops were routed and had to forfeit their early morning meal. A portion of that battle was pitched near Lee's headquarters. When the General stepped out of his tent to reconnoiter, even he became a casualty by sustaining several direct hits.²³

22. Honest Meat?

At the siege of Petersburg, Colonel John S. Mosby, well-known for capturing enemy supplies, laid over at Edge Hill during February. He noticed that Lee was "not only kind but affectionate." Lee persuaded the colonel to join him for dinner, but warned the colonel that the meal might be sparse. When mutton was placed before the men, Lee, with his good sense of humor overflowing, suggested that the meat had been stolen!²⁴

During the winter of 1862-63, Lee seldom lost a chance to use humor for the purpose of raising his men's morale. When General John B. Hood and Colonel Robert H. Chilton were talking about methods of keeping their troops from pilfering pigs and wrecking fence rails, General Hood felt compelled to dismiss

such accusations against his own men. Listening silently, Lee remarked: “Ah, General Hood, when you Texans come about, the chickens have to roost mighty high.”²⁵

23. Lee’s Math: $X + Y = \text{Headache}$

General Porter Alexander recalled one of Lee’s jollier moments. Alexander remembered visiting one evening with Colonel Talcott when they both started a discussion about mathematics; soon the two returned to their tent to solve a particular math problem. In the tent was Colonel Marshall, also a mathematician. Before long a “demijohn” was brought out and drinks offered. Yet, only Colonel Marshall imbibed at that time. Marshall humorously and adroitly acted like a clown and poured the whiskey over one of his shoulders into his glass. Not only did he try to give the impression of being a tough guy, but the other two feared that he was going to drink all the whiskey. At that moment, General Lee looked into the tent and observed Marshall’s antics. The next day when Marshall lamented the pains in his head, General Lee gave this mathematical analysis: “Too much application to mathematical problems at night, with the unknown quantities x & y represented by a demijohn & tumbler, was very apt to have for a result a head ache [*sic*] next morning.”²⁶

24. Not Shot, Yet

A man, who waited a long time to see General Lee, identified himself as a soldier. General Lee must have brandished a hidden grin when he asked him some questions. First, Lee asked him if he was a soldier in the Northern army or in the Southern army. The man replied that he was a member of Lee’s army. Then the General asked him if he had ever been shot. The man replied that he had not. Finally Lee asked: “How is that? Nearly all of our men get shot.” The man explained that he had not been shot yet because he always stayed back where the generals stayed! Lee liked to tell his staff this story and did so more than once.²⁷