

Rec
Copy

THE CONDUCT

— OF —

GENERAL CHARLES LEE

— AT THE —

BATTLE OF MONMOUTH.

BY GEN. WM. S. STRYKER.

Paper read before the New Jersey Historical Society, at Newark,
May 20, 1897.

PATERSON, N. J.:

"PRESS" PRINTING AND PUBLISHING COMPANY, 269 MAIN STREET.

1900.

J974.946

S928c

copy 1

Lee's Conduct at the Battle of Monmouth.

I desire to give you a brief and unbiased view of the conduct of Major General Charles Lee, of the Continental Army, at the Battle of Monmouth on June 28, 1778. I will ask you to waive for the present the fact of his former treachery and the charges subsequently brought against him in the court-martial, and consider only whether his course at that battle can justly be termed traitorous.

General Lee was a professional soldier and personally a brave man. All his life had been spent in studying and practicing the art of war. His active service in the Continental wars warranted the American Congress in bestowing upon him his high rank, for *experienced* soldiers were needed in the patriot army, and the people looked to General Lee to furnish that peculiar and scientific skill which they were ready to believe was not to be found in any of our general officers, not even in Washington.

Lee was captured by the British near Basking Ridge, Somerset County, New Jersey, December 13, 1776, and kept as a prisoner in New York until the spring of 1778, when he was released. That he was not true to the cause of American independence is clearly shown by an eight-page manuscript dated March 29, 1777, known as "Mr. Lee's Plan," in which he suggests to the British Commanding General various measures for the subjugation of the Americans. But from the time he marched his division from Washington's camp at Valley Forge until he reached Englishtown after the battle of Monmouth, I cannot dis-

cover that he committed one traitorous act. He promptly obeyed the order to march to the banks of the Delaware River, he crossed the river without delay, the halt at Hope-well was not by his order, the opinion expressed by him at the council of war in that village was concurred in by other well-known patriot officers. It was at least a worthy ambition to want to lead at the very front if there was to be a fight with the British Army, and his orders were to some extent discretionary. His plan of carefully attacking the rear of the British covering party, or rather, inviting them to attack him while he sent a column on the right flank and another on the left, in order to surround them, had been successfully tried before and was certainly feasible at that time. That General Lee was not equal to the management of 5,000 men in a country full of thickets, woods and marshes, was his misfortune and not due to traitorous intentions. He certainly failed to use his force as he should have done, but this was largely due to the fact that he had not the sharp co-operation of Dickinson's Jersey Militia or Morgan's Rifle Corps. They had no orders and so were inactive at the very moment he needed them. When Lee saw his right column retreating he gave his left no orders of any kind. In this he was grievously wrong. His whole force was not handled with any skill and seems virtually to have taken care of itself. The reason he gave for this was that when he found his division giving way he retreated to secure a new line of defence, where he might check the foe for the time, and although his troops seemingly got out of his control in their retrograde movement, he hoped to re form them on the very ground where General Washington was at that moment bringing up his supporting column. Before Lee was able to carry out his intentions, his control had virtually passed out of his hands by the presence of superior rank. His reply to Washington's indignant exclamation was not traitorous, and his

indirect supervision of the first fighting at the hedge fence was certainly all that could have been expected of him, for he obeyed Washington's orders, and the fighting of his weary troops was superb. His head and heart might not have been thoroughly in accord with what Washington expected of him in the hour of battle, but he executed to the best of his ability the reasonable plans that an experienced General would form at such a time. It is fair to presume that General Lee believed Clinton's force too great for him to fight with any hope of success, that his own division was likely to be overwhelmed before Washington could come to his support, and that, therefore, a short retreat would be best. Although he differed with Washington in his plans for the day, his orders were certainly discretionary, and of course his judgment was fallible. Certain it is that the active work of a more skillful General was imperatively needed at the front that day.

It is noticeable that although Washington was amazed at Lee's unexpected retreat, he did not promptly relieve him of command. It was over two hours before he and his weary troops were sent to the rear to refresh themselves. It is generally thought by students of this battle that the brigade commanders did not do their full duty in supporting General Lee, although it is difficult at this time to explain why they lacked confidence in him. It does not appear that he had publicly done anything specially to detract from his great military reputation. It is clear, however, that General Lee thought it advisable to make only a slight demonstration against the foe. He interpreted his discretionary orders to give him almost unlimited power, and he did not think it best to attack the main army, nor did he care to make a strong attack and punish them. It is also possible that he did not at that time desire to have such a measure of success as would turn the

whole British column upon him, nor in any way disprove his predictions at the council of war a week previous.

Whatever his real motives may have been on the field of battle, General Lee could not but feel that his conduct had been displeasing to many of the officers of the army. His proud, arrogant nature could not brook the thought that his behavior should be criticised by provincial troops that had never drawn sword in any of the Continental wars. In his egotism he felt that his education as a soldier and his experience in battle forbade the idea that he had done anything wrong. He said to his Staff around him that night that he was thoroughly persuaded that he had more than done his duty, and that he had obeyed instructions to the utmost of his power. He felt also, and so expressed himself, that by a retrograde movement he had extricated his command from a most dangerous situation with the loss of but few men and no material, and that he had baffled and checked the enemy. Then why not congratulation and applause from his comrades, instead of these slights and reproaches, clearly evinced in the conduct of his subordinates? As the officers gathered together for the evening meal, as the soldiers lay down in groups in the early moonlight and talked over the events of the day, few were found to say a word in favor of General Lee. This gossip of the camp did not fail to reach his ear and served to emphasize the stern words of the Chief that afternoon, which had been rankling in his mind ever since. He says that all day Monday he expected to receive some apology from General Washington, when he had become better informed of the facts. But no such words came from His Excellency, and before Lee retired for the night, his mind harrassed by the current topic of conversation in all the army outside his own quarters, all his boasted self-control forsook him and he wrote an exceedingly disrespectful letter to the Commander-in-Chief.

General Lee's life was full of complaints, of disagreements with his comrades, of quarrels with his superior officers. His temper and speech were rough and vindictive, his morals were bad, his conversation was full of impiety and profanity. But with all these personal characteristics, with full knowledge of his nationality and his early training, keeping in mind also the "Plan" which he had beforehand given to General Howe for the subjugation of America, it is scarcely just to ascribe his conduct on the battle-field of Monmouth to disloyalty, or to assume that he did anything but what his military judgment might have approved, and any other general officer perfectly true to the cause might have done.