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## Comment

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## Comment by the Editor

### A MAN OF CHARACTER

U. S. Grant is one of the enigmas of American history: his career is stranger than Lincoln's. A failure at middle life in the eyes of the world — even in his own world of unkempt Western towns — he suddenly flashed across the zenith of public attention, the greatest general of his time. Silent, unostentatious, innocent of artifice, and undisturbed by ambitious dreams, he accepted opportunity as a duty with calm assurance of his own mastery. General Sherman said that he was “as brave, patriotic, and just as the great prototype Washington, as unselfish, kind-hearted, and honest as a man should be”; but his chief characteristic, thought Sherman, was his “simple faith in success”. Yet the very qualities which contributed to his greatness — confidence in himself, straightforwardness, magnanimity, and trust in the honor of men — likewise led to the tragedies of his life.

Character was Grant's endowment. Combined with absolute personal integrity was an inveterate guilelessness that repeated betrayal of trust failed to cure. It was said of him that he believed everybody to be as honest as himself. As a boy of eight he wanted a colt owned by a neighbor who asked

twenty-five dollars for it. His father thought the horse was worth only twenty dollars and sent the boy to offer that price. "If it was not accepted," wrote Grant in his memoirs, "I was to offer twenty-two and a half, and if that would not get him, to give the twenty-five. I at once mounted a horse and went for the colt. When I got to Mr. Ralston's house, I said to him: Papa says I may offer you twenty dollars for the colt, but if you won't take that, I am to offer twenty-two and a half, and if you won't take that, to give you twenty-five." The incident was an omen. Change the figure of farmer Ralston profiting by the boy's artlessness to O. E. Babcock of the whisky ring, to Jay Gould of Black Friday fame, or to Ferdinand Ward, the final profiteer from Grant's credulity, and the horse story becomes prophetic.

Aside from his magnanimous honesty, no feature of Grant's character is more prominent than his reticence. He never made a speech if he could avoid it. When he took command of the Twenty-first Illinois Infantry he was introduced to the regiment by two very eloquent orators. The only response of the new colonel was the laconic order, "Men, go to your quarters." Later in the war, a committee from Congress came to Vicksburg to present a gold medal to the victorious leader of the armies of the West. When the last speaker had concluded his peroration there was an expectant pause. All were waiting for Grant to speak, but he remained silent. The situation became so tense that young Jesse

Grant could not bear it. "Papa, aren't you going to make a speech too?" he cried. "No, my dear boy!" answered his father with such vehemence that every one heard, and a wave of laughter ended the general embarrassment.

When occasion demanded Grant spoke concisely and with the utmost frankness. Neither of his inaugural addresses contained more than fourteen hundred words, while his Des Moines speech of approximately seven hundred words was one of the most extended impromptu addresses he ever made. But if his remarks were brief they had a ring of candor and sincerity. The terse sentences of his first inaugural are almost axiomatic. "I shall on all subjects have a policy to recommend, but none to enforce against the will of the people. Laws are to govern all alike — those opposed as well as those who favor them. I know no method to secure the repeal of bad or obnoxious laws so effective as their stringent execution." Despite the clamor of contemporary detractors, his speeches will be searched in vain for subtle dissimulation. He stated his ideas so simply and withal so fearlessly that people unaccustomed to truthfulness in politics mistook his veracity for shrewd design. His Des Moines speech in behalf of public schools was hailed as a clever bid for a third term as President! He was as incapable of hypocrisy as of treason.

J. E. B.