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T. J. Jackson

Thomas Jonathan Jackson

1824 : : 1863

A SKETCH

by EDWARD C. SMITH

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WESTON, WEST VIRGINIA

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"STONEWALL" JACKSON

A WESTERN VIRGINIA BOY

WHO ROSE *from* POVERTY *and*

OBSCURITY TO GREATNESS

I

ANCESTORS

"STONEWALL" Jackson was the product of life in the hills of western Virginia as it existed in the early part of the nineteenth century before the isolation of the hollows was broken by the coming of the railroads and the industrial development which followed. His great-grandfather was one of the pioneers of the Monongahela Valley; the descendants of the first Jackson had continued to live there; and "Stonewall" Jackson's boyhood and youth were spent at the old mill which his grandfather built on the bank of the West Fork River not far below the mouth of Freeman's Creek. The character of the great Confederate general is a mystery to the reader or the writer who does not take into account the fact that he was a western Virginian. Once realized, this fact goes far towards explaining points in his character which are otherwise inexplicable.

John Jackson came to the Buckhannon River Valley among the first pioneers in 1770. He was of Scotch-Irish descent, the Jacksons having lived in the Lowlands of Scotland and then in Londonderry, in the north of Ireland. In 1748 he emigrated to America. On the ship that brought him he had as a fellow passenger Elizabeth Cummins who had fled from her home in London on account of her violent dislike for her stepfather. The acquaintance formed on shipboard ripened into a romance, and a year or two after their landing in America they were married. For a time they lived in what is now Hardy County, West Virginia, but the climate was not to their liking and they moved to the Buckhannon River settlement which was just then being begun.

For a quarter of a century the Buckhannon settlements were subject to attacks from the savages. During the Indian wars, John Jackson and his sons took a leading part in the defence of the settlements. When

peace was declared they devoted themselves to improving their large land claims, among which was a tract of 1500 acres at the mouth of Freeman's Creek on the West Fork River owned by his son, Edward Jackson. Here at the beginning of the century he built a mill. One of Edward Jackson's sons, Jonathan Jackson, studied law in Clarksburg with his cousin, John G. Jackson, and afterwards became an attorney in that pioneer village. About 1820 he was married to Julia Beckwith Neale, of the pioneer Wood County family, and of this union Thomas Jonathan Jackson was born, January 21, 1824.

II

CHILDHOOD

The Jacksons were the leading citizens of the pioneer community of western Virginia. Colonel George Jackson had represented Harrison County in the Virginia convention which ratified the constitution of the United States and had sat in the Congress of the United States. John G. Jackson, also a member of Congress and a prominent business man, had established an aristocratic connection for the family by his marriage with the sister of Dolly Madison. Edward Jackson was a pioneer physician, millwright, and surveyor, and had represented Harrison and Lewis Counties in the State Legislature. Jonathan Jackson seemed about to enter upon a brilliant career as a lawyer, when in 1827 he succumbed to a fever contracted while nursing one of his children. His property having been swept away by security

debts, the young widow was compelled to support herself and her three small children by "keeping" a school in Clarksburg. Her home was sold and she was obliged to move into a one-room cottage provided by the Freemasons. Three years after her bereavement, she married a man who was as poor as herself and went with him to live in Fayette County where he held a position as Clerk of the County Court. Because the hardships of the trip on horseback through the almost trackless wilderness would be too great for the children and also because her husband was too poor to provide for them properly, the mother was obliged to send them to her late husband's relatives. Thomas was only six years old when he went to live with his uncle, Cummins Jackson, near the mill which his grandfather had built. He did not see his mother again until a year later when he was called to her bedside as she lay dying of tuberculosis in her Fayette County home.

The death of his mother made a

profound impression on the boy's mind, and caused his whole life to be tinged with melancholy. Forebodings of his own death from the same dread disease seem to have been ever present with him, and caused him to take elaborate precautions to avoid it. Always melancholy, always a fatalist, it is thought that the extreme Puritanism which marked his religion was due to the bereavements and sufferings of his boyhood.

III

BOYHOOD

He returned to Lewis County and continued to make his home with Cummins Jackson except for a brief period when he was enticed away by his older brother Warren. The two boys, aged 14 and 12 years, went through the woods to the Ohio river and then floated down that stream and the Mississippi until they came to an island at the southwestern corner of Kentucky. They lived here a whole winter supporting themselves by cutting cordwood for passing steamers. The island was malarious, and the boys were soon ill. They were finally able to return home through the kindness of a steamboat captain who took pity on their plight.

For thirteen years the life of the future general was spent on his uncle's farm and in the old mill. It was an existence not unlike that of hundreds of boys of that day in

western Virginia and resembling that of boys living in the backwoods counties of West Virginia in our own time. Tom Jackson, as he was called, did much work on his uncle's farm. He assisted in the operation of the grist and saw mill, and understood the business so well that he was sometimes left in complete charge of the establishment to see that the corn and wheat were properly ground for the neighboring farmers. Cummins Jackson's land was almost entirely covered with the primeval forest which could be cleared only with great difficulty. It was to the advantage of the owner to preserve the giant poplars as long as he could, for they furnished him a comparatively large amount of the income from the estate. He could cut the trees, float the logs down Freeman's Creek and the West Fork River to the mill pond and saw them into weather-boarding and ceiling for the straggling village of Weston which was situated four miles south of the mill. Practically all of the twenty or thirty houses in

the village had been built or finished with the lumber sawed at the Jackson mill. Whenever an exceptionally large log was to be brought out of the woods, Tom was placed in charge of the work, and it is said that he was always successful in directing the slaves and the white laborers in their task. He also helped by breaking horses and oxen to work and when he was only ten years old he could drive oxen like a man. He also rode his uncle's horses in the races which were held on the Westfield track, adjoining the Jackson estate. At the age of twelve, he was the peer of any rider on the West Fork.

The boy's associations with the horse-racing crowd of early Lewis County were not conducive to his best moral development. He seemed, however, not to have been affected by the licentiousness and irreligion around him. His honesty and truthfulness are still proverbial in the county of his boyhood. There were several churches in the neighborhood, including one at Broad Run, one on

Freeman's Creek and one on Hacker's Creek, but there is no tradition that he ever attended any of them. The rough itinerants who preached at these churches were made fun of by the gentry and by the aristocracy of the village of Weston, and it is little wonder that he did not receive religious training. It is hardly probable either that he received personal religious instruction from his uncle Cummins.

Like every other boy in the Monongahela Valley in the thirties, life was not all work on the farm. There were fish of large size in the mill pond, and he angled there assiduously, even entering into a contract to furnish fresh fish to citizens of Weston. There were plenty of deer in the forests within a few miles of his home, and he often took part in the great deer hunts that were arranged every fall. He rode with his uncle among the foremost in the fox hunts. During the winter he set snares for small animals.

Schools were few and far between

in western Virginia at that time. It was fortunate for the future general that the neighborhood in which his uncle lived was one of the most thickly settled between the Alleghanies and the Ohio River. For three months, every winter, a school was taught in an abandoned log house near the mill, by whatever teacher could be employed with the slender subscription money raised among the parents of the pupils. Tom went to the Old Field school every winter except the year he spent on the Mississippi. He was the leader among the pupils in arithmetic but he was slow in his other studies, and was often unable to recite with the other members of the class. The next day he would still be unprepared for the day's work, but he used to tell his teacher triumphantly that he had learned the lesson for the day before. By the close of the term he was usually as far advanced as other pupils of his years.

As he neared manhood he thought he could detect symptoms of tuber-

culosis. His work in the mill was not calculated to improve his physical condition, and he therefore asked his uncle to find other employment for him. Being ambitious of distinction in his county, he sought the position of constable when he was only eighteen years of age. The law provided that the incumbent of the office should be twenty-one, but Cummins Jackson was a man of influence with the County Court, and the appointment was given without question. His chief duties in the office were in connection with collecting debts and levying on the property of debtors. He was very successful.

IV

OPPORTUNITY

A wider field was soon opened to him. Gibson Butcher, a boy from the neighborhood, had been appointed a cadet at West Point from the district which then embraced Lewis County, but had failed to pass the physical examination, and the position was vacant. A Weston blacksmith, knowing of Tom's ambition to secure an education, suggested to his uncle that Tom should apply for the appointment. When the subject was broached to him, the juvenile constable fell in with the idea, and immediately proceeded to secure letters of recommendation from the officers of the county court and from leading citizens of the county. He also obtained permission from Matthew Edmiston, then a rising young attorney in Weston, to study in his library in preparation for his entrance examinations. A letter written to the

Hon. S. D. Hays, then representing the district in Congress, brought a favorable reply to his inquiries. Young Jackson, with the instinct for decisive action which impressed itself on the world at a later period, resolved to set out at once for Washington. He borrowed two horses from a neighbor, and a negro boy to bring them back to their owner, packed his few personal effects in a pair of old saddlebags and set out for Clarksburg to catch the Winchester stage. When he reached Clarksburg he found that the stage had already gone, but nothing daunted, he rode after it in the night and overtook it at the next stop. On his arrival at Washington he went at once, without changing his muddy clothes, to the office of Congressman Hays and requested an introduction to the Secretary of War. Secretary Spencer told Mr. Hays that he was holding the position for some worthy, but needy descendant of a Revolutionary soldier. Colonel Hays replied that his candidate was the man he was seeking. "His grandfather

and great-grandfather served throughout the Revolutionary war," said Mr. Hays, "and the former, with his brother, continued the struggle with the Indians until the treaty of 1795 closed the conflict. My candidate is poor but ambitious to uphold the prestige of an honored name." The Secretary was favorably impressed, and asked to see the youth from the hills of western Virginia. After questioning him for some time, he was so impressed with the boy's evident ambition and determination to obtain an education that he gave him the coveted appointment.

Representative Hays invited the awkward and untutored farmer boy to remain with him a few days and see the sights of the capital city; but young Jackson was so anxious to join his classes that he set out for West Point, only delaying to climb to the dome of the unfinished Capitol and view Washington and the surrounding country. The impression which he made on Washington officials was

most favorable. Representative Hays wrote to the superintendent of the Military Academy asking that the entrance examinations be made easy for him, stating that he was a youth who would make up for his lack of education by applying himself. The letter has its effect, and young Jackson was admitted.

V

WEST POINT

The green country boy from the wilds of the West Fork River presented a strange appearance on his arrival at the Academy. He was then nineteen, and fully three years older than the average of his class, but far below them in education. His appearance when he entered the institution is thus described by one of the cadets.

He was apparently about twenty years of age and was full grown; his figure was angular and clumsy; his gait was awkward; he was clad in old-fashioned Virginia homespun woolen cloth; he bore across his shoulders a pair of weather-stained saddlebags; and his hat was one of those heavy, low-crowned, broad-brimmed hats usually worn in those days by county constables, etc. He tramped along by the side of the sergeant with an air of resolution, and his stolid look

added to the inflexible determination of his whole aspect, so that one of us remarked, "that fellow has come here to stay."

Few cadets at West Point ever had a more difficult time at the start than young Jackson. His lack of sufficient education told against him at every stage. It was only by the exercise of his indomitable will that he managed to stay in the Academy. "You can be whatever you want to be", he wrote in one of his notebooks, and he set himself to conquer every obstacle. Just before taps sounded, he piled his grate with anthracite coal and, sprawling at full length before the fire, continued his studies until far into the night. Sometimes he would be a day behind his classmates in his preparation, but he learned thoroughly every lesson as he came to it. He had great difficulty in mastering the simplest maneuvers on the drill field, even the elementary principle of keeping step proving a bugbear to him. Added to all his other difficulties the old affection of

his lungs troubled him somewhat during the first years at the Academy, and he felt obliged to guard his health carefully by always sitting bolt upright so that there would be no compression on his lungs. In spite of all obstacles he doggedly pursued his way, rising every year a little higher in relative rank among his classmates until, in 1846, he was graduated seventeenth in a class of fifty-nine. It was a common saying among his classmates that if the course had been one year longer he would have stood at the head of his class.

VI

MEXICAN CAMPAIGN

A short leave of absence was granted him at graduation, which he spent among his native hills, assisting in the organization of a volunteer company at Weston for service in Mexico. The Mexican War was about to break out, and he was ordered to join his regiment for service in the field. In General Scott's expedition against Mexico City, he was in the thick of the fighting in most of the desperate battles which marked the progress of the army. His fine disregard for personal danger and his skill in serving his battery caused attention to be directed toward him, and he was promoted successively from the rank of brevet second lieutenant to that of brevet major—a more rapid rise than that of any other officer of his rank in the war.

Major Jackson's duties with the army of occupation in the Mexican

capital were neither arduous nor important. There was no way open in which to spend his time except to join in the social life of the city. It is rather strange that this period of his life was marked by the beginning of his religious experience which continued for the remainder of his life. The principal element of his faith was duty; and he was so punctilious in the performance of his duty in every walk of life that there is little wonder that he entered whole-souled into all of his religious observances. His devotions were henceforth a part of his daily life. He followed literally the injunction "to pray without ceasing". In every act of his life from this time forth, religion had a tremendous influence, so that he has been compared with Cromwell, Bayard and Havelock among the great captains whose religion was a supreme passion.

VII

VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE

After the close of the war, garrison life in the regular army did not appeal to his ambitious nature, and his post at Fort Meade, Florida, was not in a climate which suited the delicate state of his health. Upon being offered a professorship in the Virginia Military Institute at Lexington in Rockbridge County, he resigned his commission and went to live in the Valley of Virginia. Here he remained, an obscure instructor, until the outbreak of the War for Southern Independence. He seems not to have allowed his interest in military affairs to lapse during this period, for it is said that he studied and mastered the campaigns of Napoleon. The quiet years of his professorship ripened his faculties and gave him a broader outlook upon life; but he was still essentially a western Virginian. His habits of mind seemed to have con-

formed with as great difficulty to the new society in which he found himself as his body had conformed to the military movements at West Point.

VIII

POLITICS

In common with most of the other intelligent citizens of Virginia, he deplored the existence of slavery in the state as an economic and social evil and desired its abolition by state legislation. Yet he never believed that the institution was morally wrong. He owned a few slaves which he used mainly as servants in his house, and justified slavery as of divine origin supported by statements in the Bible. His politics were those of the prevailing states' rights school of Virginia. When it became evident that war between the State of Virginia and the Federal government could not be averted, he did not hesitate for a moment to offer his sword to his State. His decision seems not to have followed any realization of a conflict of duty to state and to national government as in the case of Robert E. Lee and George H.

Thomas, but was a natural result of his residence in the Valley of Virginia. Major Jackson was ordered to Camp Lee near Richmond at the first call of the state government, and devoted a few weeks to the supervision of the training of volunteers. He was commissioned a colonel of the state troops, April 26, 1861, and sent to guard the entrance to the Valley of Virginia at Harper's Ferry. This was the post he wanted. It led him over familiar ground in the lower Shenandoah and gave him an added opportunity to acquaint himself with all the strategic features of the terrain. The Shenandoah Valley was to be the scene of his most brilliant campaigns.

IX

BULL RUN

The early summer of 1861 was given over to drill and organization by the armies on the Virginia border. The Confederates were driven out of the Monongahela Valley by McClellan, and the authorities at Washington were impatient to begin a forward movement through eastern Virginia to Richmond. It became evident that the position of Beauregard's army around Centerville would be attacked by the Union troops, and Jackson and his brigade of Virginians were sent to reinforce him. On the 21st of July the two armies met in "the best planned and the worst fought action of the war." The raw troops on both sides were difficult to control. The superior numbers of the Federals began to tell, and the Confederates gave ground almost everywhere. Some of the regiments were broken, and the men quit the field in disor-

ganized masses. At the crucial point on the field, the Henry House Plateau, Jackson and his Virginia brigade held fast. General Bee in rallying his men, pointed to the steady line on the plateau and cried, "Look, there is Jackson standing like a stone wall." The name applied in the heat of the action, was remembered afterwards, and it stuck. Henceforth the brilliant leader was known as Stonewall Jackson, and the First Virginia Brigade, as the Stonewall Brigade. The Federal lines at Bull Run were broken toward the close of the day, and the troops of the South won their first great victory.

X

SHENANDOAH VALLEY

Jackson, now a major-general, returned to the Valley where the remainder of the year was spent in comparative inaction. At the beginning of 1862 McClellan planned a double invasion of Virginia. He was to lead an attack in person on the Peninsula, and three armies were to concentrate in the Shenandoah Valley, sweep that region of Confederates, and approach Richmond from the west. Jackson had 17,000 men; four scattered armies opposing him had a total of 64,000. He attacked Milroy at McDowell, defeated him and pursued him northward. Next he fell upon Banks at Winchester and drove him beyond the Potomac. Fremont from the west and Shields from the east, each with more men than Jackson had, and each twenty miles from Strasburg, moved toward that place, hoping to unite and intercept

Jackson on his retreat. Jackson was sixty-five miles from Strasburg; but with his gallant "foot cavalry" he reached Strasburg first, defeated Fremont at Cross Keys and Shields at Front Royal, spread dismay in the National Capital and caused more military damage to the federals than a defeat before Richmond would have accomplished. He next moved his men by rail to join Lee at Richmond, and falling upon McClellan's left, helped to force the retreat of the Federal army from within sight of the Confederate capital. Then moving rapidly northward, he interposed his army between Pope and Washington, at Manassas Junction. Second Bull Run, due mainly to Jackson's maneuver, was a greater blow to the Federals than the first battle. It was the same at Fredericksburg, Harper's Ferry, Antietam and Chancellorsville. His genius impressed itself on every campaign, and he was recognized as the greatest commander that the war had developed. His mere presence struck terror to his foes. It has been

estimated by high military authority that his being in command of an army added fifty per cent to its effective strength.

XI

HIS PRE-EMINENCE

At the close of the first day's battle at Chancellorsville, while returning from a reconnaissance made in the direction of the enemy, he was wounded in the left arm twice and also in the right hand by some of his own troops. He was placed on a litter and started to the rear while the position was still under heavy fire. One of his litter bearers was struck down, and the general was thrown heavily to the ground, the fall producing a contusion in his side. His physicians found it necessary to amputate his left arm near the shoulder. The wound seemed to be healing satisfactorily, and his complete recovery was expected. Within a day or two, however, he was stricken with pleuro-pneumonia, thought to have been superinduced by his fall from the litter. In spite of the efforts of the best physicians of the South he succumbed to the disease.

So passed away, at the height of his fame and in the high tide of the success of the Southern arms, the general whom Robert E. Lee called his "right arm". History acclaims "Stonewall" Jackson as one of the great military geniuses of the world. He has been compared to Napoleon more than any later general. His campaigns have been studied as text-books in the great military academies of the world.

Yet he was the simplest, sweetest, most lovable of men. The members of his command, particularly the Stonewall Brigade, were to him as children, upon whom he bestowed parental care. It is true that he compelled them to make rapid marches through cold and snow and to charge enemy breastworks in the face of the most galling fire, but he shared with them every hardship and every danger. He prayed unceasingly with a simple, child-like faith before every battle, and he gave thanks to God after every victory. His simplicity, his disregard for pomp and circum-

stance and his self-abnegation brought him the respect and the admiration of the world.

These qualities are inherent in the great race from which he sprang; and they were heightened by the experiences of his youth and early manhood. As a preeminent military genius, he belongs to the whole world; but as a man he belongs peculiarly to the hills which lie between the Alleghanies and the Ohio river.

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