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SOLDIER OF MISFORTUNE

RECENTLY THERE CAME INTO MY POSSESSION a 112-page manuscript written over eighty years ago in two different handwritings and in two different colours of ink. The author was Robert Alder McLeod, a brilliant Harvard graduate belonging to the Class of 1869

The tightly rolled manuscript, rather brittle and discoloured by age, proved to contain the life story of that greatest of all Italian statesmen, Count Cavour, and of the highly important part he played in the process of unification of the various Italian-speaking duchies, states, and kingdoms — that is, Piedmont, Parma, Lombardy, Venetia, Tuscany, Naples, and the rest—during the second third of the nineteenth century to form what is now modern Italy. It was originally entitled *The Life of Cavour*, but the author had drawn his pen through the first three words and renamed it *Cavour and Italian Unity* as being more accurately descriptive of the contents. At the end of the manuscript appears a brief bibliography, consisting only of Italian writers.

This unique literary discovery interested me greatly, for I had long known that the author had lived in Italy for a number of years and must therefore have learned, practically at first hand, much about the numerous political and geographical changes that were then but recent Italian history.

Unfortunately McLeod, like two other distinguished Harvard graduates who, though considerably older than he, were nevertheless his contemporaries, constantly laboured under a severe physical handicap. I refer, of course, to William H. Prescott, famous author of *The Conquest of Mexico* and *The Conquest of Peru*, and to Francis Parkman, equally celebrated for *The Oregon Trail*, *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*, and many other historical works. It was not near-blindness, however, that McLeod suffered from, as with Prescott; nor was it some obscure trouble of the brain and nervous exhaustion that brought on frequent periods of

utter helplessness, as with Parkman. It was rather the impairment of his general health, primarily the aftermath of four long years of fighting on the side of the South during the Civil War, in one of which engagements he lost his right arm.

The harsh and exhausting experiences he underwent as a soldier, together with six years of subsequent gruelling study in college and law school, so depleted his strength as afterwards to make him fall an easy victim to tuberculosis and to force upon him the imperious necessity of seeking a more equable and less rigorous climate than that of New England. Accordingly, the last seven years of his life were spent in Europe—in Austria, France, Switzerland, but most of all in Italy, which he learned to love dearly. His death in 1878, when he was but thirty-four years old, cut off what his classmates believed to be a most promising literary career.

McLeod had already contributed a number of literary and historical articles to two leading American magazines. The manuscript on Cavour was the last he ever wrote. Though it seems probable that it was begun in Italy, certain it is that it was finished in Algiers, whither he had gone on the advice of his physician in an effort to regain his slowly waning health. Much of it was written in pencil while he sat up in bed. About half of it is in his own handwriting, the rest having been copied in paler ink by his French wife, who knew no word of English. The eight months spent in Algiers, however, did not bring the hoped-for recovery but only recurrent hemorrhages. According to his family, he died before he could get his completed manuscript off to his Boston publishers.

One night now nearly fifty years ago I spoke to President Eliot of Harvard as he came down the aisle of the Fogg Museum in Cambridge at the conclusion of one of his lectures on Municipal Government. "President Eliot," said I, "do you happen to recall in the Class of 1869 a young man named Robert Alder McLeod?" "Oh yes, very distinctly," he flashed back. "I remember him well. He had fought in the Civil War on the Southern side—lost his right arm—a very brilliant and most remarkable fellow!"

Why should the mere name of Robert Alder McLeod instantly evoke so vivid a memory after more than forty years, during which time, as president of the oldest American university, Dr. Eliot had come into contact with thousands of other students? Doubtless it was because of McLeod's unique background and because he had achieved under most adverse circumstances the highest undergraduate scholastic record ever made up to that time at Harvard.

Robert Alder McLeod was of Revolutionary ancestry. His great-great-grandfather was a chief of the Clan MacLeod, whose residence was Dunvegan Castle on the Island of Skye off the west coast of Scotland. Dunvegan dates back seven or

eight hundred years and is the oldest continuously inhabited castle in the British Isles.

At the outbreak of the American Revolution a company of MacLeods was raised for the 71st Highlanders in the English service. At the close of that war Lieutenant Roderick McLeod received a grant of land from the Crown and settled in New Brunswick, which was then part of Nova Scotia. Robert Alder McLeod was Roderick's great-grandson. On his mother's side he was descended from William Trueman, a Yorkshire emigrant.

From a brief autobiographical sketch written at graduation time, and from other class records now in the Harvard archives, I have gathered certain details of his career. One of his classmates, who described McLeod as "easily the first scholar in each branch of study" and as "the romantic figure" of the class, added this further tribute: "He died before he could win for himself and us those honors which we expected from that persevering industry which put him so unfailingly at our head in every intellectual contest in college."

Such a career is the more remarkable because of its unpromising beginning. But let him tell his own story:

I was born in Bedeque, Prince Edward Island, December 21, 1843. My father, Rev. Alexander William McLeod, D.D., was at that time a Wesleyan Methodist minister and consequently had frequently changed his residence. Shortly after my birth he was stationed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and, having been chosen editor of the provincial *Wesleyan* and of the *Athenaeum*, both weekly papers, he continued to reside in Halifax for ten years.

Until I was nearly nine years old, I went to no school except for a few weeks to a country school in Point de Bute, New Brunswick, while there on a visit. In August, 1852, I was sent to the Mount Allison Academy, Sackville, New Brunswick, about a month after the term had commenced, and studied there during the rest of the school year. Being remarkably small for my age, I was chosen to read an original composition at the Commencement, June, 1853. In September, 1854, our family moved from Halifax to Baltimore, Md.

My father began in March, 1855, to edit and publish the *Methodist Magazine* and, in connection with this undertaking, opened a bookstore. The two enterprises were carried on together till the close of 1857, when both ended, having turned out pecuniary failures.

During those two years I assisted in the store and with the magazine in such ways as I could, but went for three months in 1856 to a public school. About the beginning of 1858 I opened a bookstore on my own account and carried it on profitably for somewhat less than a year, selling out at last in order to make another effort to accomplish what had always been my chief wish—to get a regular education.

In October, 1860, I went to Charleston, South Carolina, hoping soon to make

money enough to enable me to go to school, and attracted also to the South by the prospect of stirring times there. I remained one year, employing all my evenings and leisure moments in studying chiefly the common English branches.

I had been present in the Charleston Convention, December, 1860, when the Ordinance of Secession was passed, and had witnessed the first attack on Sumter, and was very enthusiastic for the Southern cause. Having enlisted as private in the Washington Light Infantry of Charleston, I spent three months, beginning November 9th, 1861, with this company in active service. On February 24, 1862, our company enlisted for one year and was mustered into the Confederate service. Somewhat later we all enlisted 'for the war'. I was elected Corporal and rose later by successive steps to be Orderly Sergeant.

Then followed a succession of engagements and scouting expeditions. Concerning one of the latter he writes: "One of our party was captured but the other and I escaped, taking Charles Moore prisoner. From his diary we learned the plan of Gillmore's attack on Morris Island made on July 10, and forewarned General Beauregard of it."

Later came other skirmishes and a "very interesting experience"—being struck on the knee by a piece of shell "but not much hurt"! From October 3 to November 3 he was in Fort Sumter and witnessed Gillmore's severest bombardment when the fort's falling wall killed eleven of his company. Afterwards came numerous other engagements—Drury's Bluff, Mechanicsville, Cold Harbor. At Petersburg his division began digging in and fighting.

"June 17, 1864," he writes further, "we repulsed the enemy who attacked our lines. For sixty-six days our brigade was kept in the trenches, very near the enemy, without relief, except for two days, all the time doing hard work, having insufficient food, and only three hours of sleep allowed each night."

On Sunday, August 21, McLeod was in an engagement in which two Southern brigades were nearly annihilated:

I was on that day, as for some time before, in command of our company. Within a few yards of the enemy's breastworks I fell, a minié-ball having passed through my right arm. Being taken prisoner, I was sent to City Point Hospital; then by fortunate mistake to Hower Hospital, Philadelphia, where it was customary to send only the Union wounded.

There, September 1, 1864, my arm was amputated by Dr. Moon between the elbow and shoulder. Towards the end of October, I was sent to the rebel hospital at Baltimore, where the treatment of the prisoners was bad. I was soon sent to Point Lookout, and there, with many other disabled prisoners, put aboard the *Baltic* and carried to Savannah for exchange.

The voyage of the *Baltic* showed me the most dreadful scenes which I have

ever witnessed. Rations were miserably small and always failed to go round, so that men actually died of starvation; wounds went long undressed; the boys in attendance cursed and kicked the dying and offered insults to the dead.

Later young McLeod got to Spartanburg, S.C., where he studied Greek and Latin for five months with a little French thrown in. During his service as a soldier he had never lost sight of his chief aim—study. His plan was to make abstracts of whatever he studied in the quiet of camp, and commit these to memory, so as to have something to repeat to himself on the march or in the face of the enemy, when books were hard to procure. In this way he acquired some knowledge of world history and Latin grammar:

As a private, I made my hours of guard-duty pass pleasantly by reciting to myself the whole of 'The School of the Company' and 'The School of the Battalion' of Hardee's *Tactics*,—one volume and a half, which I learnt by heart. I went through Davies' *Bourdon* twice in camp. Having found a copy of *Caesar* in a sacked house near Richmond, I was making good progress in it in the trenches around Petersburg before I was taken prisoner. In 1863 I invented a new system of signals, which was approved at Richmond, for the navy. To keep up practice in composition, I kept a diary throughout the war.

(That diary, which would have thrown a valuable light on the war, was unfortunately destroyed years later in France).

McLeod returned to Baltimore in August, 1865, and after examining various college catalogues soon selected Harvard as the best American college because, as he said, it was the most expensive and the hardest to get into:

After a month's hard study by myself at home I passed the September examination successfully. Failure to enter would have disconcerted me, as I had borrowed twenty dollars to come on with, but had not secured means to return.

I began without any means whatever to meet the expenses of the college course, but this hindrance has been entirely removed by advances kindly made by friends, by the scholarship which has been granted me yearly, by prize money from the college, and by fees received for private tuition. I have never been absent during my college course.

During his first three years he won four first prizes, two second prizes, and a "detur". He spoke at a Junior Exhibition, a Senior Exhibition, and at Commencement. He received other marks of distinction also, having been chosen editor, orator, president, and vice-president, and he wrote occasionally for newspapers and literary periodicals. On graduation, he was appointed to the Harris Fellowship for 1869-70 and the following year entered the Law School.

The remarkable impression McLeod created even as a college freshman is seen

in an interesting passage written over forty years later in his *Autobiography* by Andrew D. White, the Cornell University president who afterwards became United States Minister to Russia and Ambassador to Germany. In describing his first meeting with Judge Rockwood Hoar, later the Attorney-General of the United States, Dr. White wrote:

I saw him first at Harvard during a competition for the Boylston Prize at which we were fellow judges. All the speaking was good, some of it admirable; but the especially remarkable pieces were two. First of these was a recital of Washington Irving's 'Broken Heart' by an undergraduate from the British provinces, Robert Alder McLeod. Nothing could be more simple and perfect in its way; nothing more free from any effort at orating; all was in the most quiet and natural manner possible. The second piece was a rendering of Poe's 'Bells' and was a most amazing declamation, the different sorts of bells being indicated by changes of voice ranging from basso profundo to the highest falsetto, and the feelings aroused in the orator being indicated by modulations which must have cost him months of practice.

The contest being ended, and the committee having retired to make their award, various members expressed an opinion in favor of Mr. McLeod's quiet recital, when Judge Hoar, who had seemed up to that moment immersed in thought, seemed suddenly to awake, and said: 'If I had a son who spoke that bell piece in that style, I believe I'd choke him.' The vote was unanimously in favor of Mr. McLeod, and then came out a curious fact. Having noticed that he bore an empty sleeve, I learned from Professor Peabody that he had lost his arm while fighting on the Confederate side in our Civil War, and that he was a man of remarkably fine scholarship and noble character.

McLeod, however, did not allow the loss of his right arm to handicap him. Instead, his imagination became fired with the purpose of developing himself in every way. He taught himself to write almost faultlessly with his left hand. He even learned to dance—and danced well. He practised singing and elocution, learned to speak French and German proficiently, and not only cultivated the social arts but excelled in them. "I have never known anyone," his older sister told me half a century ago, "who seemed more nearly to approach the ideal gentleman, such perfect poise and such graciousness of manner had he."

Robert Alder McLeod's ambition was boundless. His feeling of power intoxicated him, so that obstacles became only challenges. His ideas were on a large scale, and he delighted in the vastest plans and in universal conclusions. Unfortunately, however, his war years and his intense application as a student had so seriously impaired his health that his physicians peremptorily ordered him to Europe. He left in the early spring of 1871 and, except for one brief visit to the United States, remained abroad until his death seven years later.

Two and a half years were spent in travelling through France, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, and other parts of Europe. For some time he tutored the children of an American family named Thayer. One of these was William Roscoe Thayer (1859—1923), who later was a member of the Harvard Class of 1881 and subsequently distinguished himself as a man of letters; for he edited the *Harvard Graduates' Magazine* (1892—1915), wrote a biography of Theodore Roosevelt, whom he had known intimately since college days, as well as biographies of Washington and John Hay, and published several volumes on Italian history, his most noted being a monumental two-volume biography of Cavour, unifier of Italy. McLeod and Thayer drew inspiration from the same Italian wells. That the latter was in fundamental agreement with McLeod's earlier appraisal of Cavour's place in history, as revealed in his unpublished manuscript, is evidenced in the concluding sentence of Thayer's great work resulting from a third of a century of scholarly research: "Among the champions of Liberty, since the beginning, none had a nobler vision of her beauty, none confided in her more loyally, none served her more wisely than Camillo di Cavour."

In Europe, McLeod's health improved for a time, though his voice became so weak that he was forced to spend one summer in Gratz, Austria, under the treatment of an eminent throat specialist. In 1877 he met a Parisian lady, the petite and beautiful Madame *Veuve* Tavernier, *née* Figuet, a widow with two children. As she rode gaily along one day through the Forest of Fontainebleau, her high silk hat, flowing veil, and wide black band of widowhood attracted his attention. Never did Cupid shoot his arrow with surer aim, for their wedding was celebrated within three months by an officiating Protestant clergyman.

But their union, though happy, was destined to last less than two years. Occasionally he went on long trips to Italy to get material for articles he was writing. When he returned, however, the family made up for his absences by spending much of their time in the great out-of-doors, for they were passionate lovers of Nature. Though McLeod had every hope and expectation that he would eventually recover his health, fate was against him. One Sunday he became suddenly ill and was ordered to leave France within twenty-four hours. There in Mustapha, a suburb of Algiers, they took a pleasant villa surrounded by a lovely garden with an orange grove in the rear.

But the change did not bring the hoped-for recovery, for there in the midst of strangers, victim of repeated hemorrhages, McLeod gradually sank and died in his wife's arms on March 3, 1878. In the cemetery of a little English church in that far-off Algerian suburb he now lies buried. Twenty-five years afterwards the surviving

members of the Class of 1869 placed on the wall of the church a memorial tablet bearing a lengthy Latin inscription. Shortly after his death his wife returned to Paris where their posthumous child Roberta was born in June.

One spring evening in 1912 I called at the home of William Roscoe Thayer, in Cambridge, to get some details concerning his former tutor. He welcomed me most cordially, and for a long time we talked about those early days.

"During the many years I have spent in Europe since that time," said he, "I have met and known personally most of the leading statesmen and intellectuals there, but not one of them impressed me as having the mental acumen and intellectual capacity of Robert Alder McLeod. He was a most remarkable man . . . without exception the most brilliant I have ever known."

How successful McLeod was in the art of literary composition is evidenced on every page he published, for that was his major interest. One may confidently declare that, had he lived out the biblical three-score years and ten, he would undoubtedly have become one of the greatest and most skillful American authors, for he had the magic gift of words, of apt phrase and telling illustration, of fresh figures of speech and vividly descriptive epithet, of noble and sometimes rhythmical prose that go with the highest form of literary craftsmanship.

An early foreshadowing of a literary career is found in the fact that when only nine years old, as has already been indicated, he had been asked to read an "original composition" at the Mount Allison Academy Commencement in 1853. That manuscript, written in a fine Spencerian hand and entitled "The Importance of a Good Education", is in front of me as I write, its 485 words ending with his signature. His opening paragraph on "Idols" is interesting because of its rhetorical structure as well as its geographical and historical references:

Think not that I intend to write a long discourse upon those images of wood and stone to which, in heathen lands, so many bow and worship, or that I am writing statistics of the number and variety of idols. Or do not think that I require you to wander with me to the far off shores of benighted Africa, or to undertake a pilgrimage to pagan India to witness the heathen sacrifice themselves to their inanimate gods, or do not imagine that I wish you to accompany me in a journey back through the dust of ages, to the time when Cortez and his sturdy followers were first dazzled by the sight of the golden gods of the Aztecs, for I wish not to take you to such distant lands or such remote ages, but I wish to show you the idols which, in the very heart of a Christian land, so many worship, and on whose altar so many sacrifice their all; aye, and that country is no other than our own glorious republic.

On reading his article "On a Housetop in Capri," published in *Lippincott's Magazine* in September, 1876, one detects the eye of the literary artist, for he singled

out the unusual and picturesque. He describes the late-evening scenes he viewed in mid-May from the roof of the Hotel Tiberio, a famous inn of Capri; he pictures them in language that charms the reader with its wizardry, mingling the rich and varied history of the island with stories, legends, and beautiful descriptions often poetic in quality. He makes one actually see, for example, the gorgeous significance of the twelve imperial palaces of Augustus and Tiberius on that island paradise, for "in this retreat Tiberius spent the last ten years of his life, and Capri became the virtual capital of the Roman empire."

"On the south side of the island," he writes, "there is a projecting ledge called the Rock of the Sirens, and there are not wanting learned men who will prove to you that this is the veritable Island of the Sirens of Homer. And when the first sirocco rages, you may still hear their dangerous songs in the dashing and roaring of the waves and the whistling of the wind around crags and through branches; and in the fringe of angry foam you may see the bones of luckless mariners that lie bleaching on the shore. Woe, then, to the wandering Ulysses that lets his frail bark drift on this treacherous coast!"

In "The Abbess of Ischia", in *Lippincott's* for May, 1877, McLeod recounts the tale of a nun, Teresina, whose embalmed body he had seen not far from a ghastly row of grinning mummies standing upright around the walls of several convent cells. The tale is strange and fast moving—a fascinating intermingling of passion, crime, mistaken identity, bribery, intrigue, revenge, frustration, and sublimation.

Lippincott's published two other articles by McLeod. One, entitled "The Italian Lakes" and carrying seven illustrations, was featured as the opener of the April, 1878, issue. But even more important is his "Can Herculaneum Be Excavated?", appearing as the leading article in the December, 1877, *Atlantic Monthly*. Mr. McLeod believed that much more might be learned about the life and customs of earlier Roman times, when the Eternal City was in her heyday, if Pompeii's companion city were exhumed, for not the least remarkable function of volcanic eruptions, he declared, is that of preserving intact to later ages the perishable monuments of the human race.

After taking numerous measurements with painstaking care, he estimated that to excavate the rest of the city would take ten years and cost about \$4,000,000. He prophesied, however, that money coming from the sale of the works of mural art, statues, utensils, and other implements that would be found, together with admission fees from visiting tourists, would, in a few years, cover the entire cost of excavation. "Though the idea was laughed at then", said William Roscoe Thayer to me that night, "it was actually followed later."

Here, then, rescued from oblivion, if only for a fleeting moment, is the dramatic story of a hitherto unknown soldier, a Canadian-born Harvard scholar, whose brilliance of mind amounted to sheer genius, amazing all who knew him; who, it would seem, deserved better at the hands of Fortune; but whose promising career was cut short long before it had a chance to reach its zenith. Well may he be described as a "soldier of misfortune".