

ADDRESS

OF

MR. JAMES J. HILL

READ AT THE

CEREMONIES FOR UNVEILING A STATUE

OF THE LATE

WILLIAM COLVILL

Colonel of the First Regiment of Minnesota Volunteers,

IN THE

STATE CAPITOL AT ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

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We have met to-day to honor the memory of one of our country's modest heroes, to commemorate the deeds of his gallant comrades in arms, to recall once more that great occasion which gave to him and those who fought side by side with him, enduring fame. A nation or a state is at its best upon occasions such as this. The strife of party and of persons ceases. Selfish interests stand aside. For the moment the things that occupy our days of action are hushed.

The patriot whose name this memorial bears was one of those direct and simple men who rise so often to the level of great acts. Outside of his military record, the life of Colonel Colvill reads as modestly as even he would have desired.

He was born at Forestville, New York, in 1830. He came to Minnesota in the early fifties, and settled at Red Wing- in 1854. He was a quiet, scholarly, unpretentious man, filled with the faith of patriotic duty. Nowhere did the flame of devotion burn more brightly or more steadily than among the scattered people of the frontier. Minnesota was one of the newest and most sparsely peopled of all the States. Yet the first oiler of help in the dark days of 1861, the first definite proposal by a State to put men in the held in defence of the Union and of human freedom, was made by our war governor, Alexander Ramsey. And among the first to respond was this unknown young lawyer of Red Wing, who raised there a body of recruits, constituting Company F of the immortal First Minnesota, and he became their captain.

The details of his life thereafter are known to you all; part of a proud and grave inheritance. Captain Colvill became Colonel Colvill in 1863. From first to last he took part in more than thirty battles. First wounded in that fiery baptism with which the war opened at Bull Run, he commanded his regiment from the first battle of Fredericksburg until that bloody charge at Gettysburg left him wounded on the field. After his days of service were over, he returned quietly to the simple life he loved. When the battle flags were

about to be removed from the old capitol to the new, the veterans of the First Minnesota came to escort that tattered ensign to its home in this stately pile. Their old leader met with them, spent the evening with comrades at the Soldiers' Home, and when the morning came he had answered another and a final call.

His virtues need no other commemoration than this simple statement of facts, and the tried and lasting affection of those who were near to him in life. It was characteristic of him, of his sanity and largeness of mind, that he coveted no public recognition. He declared, when a brevet brigadier generalship was offered to him, that he would rather die as Colonel of the old First Minnesota. It is thus that he lives in history and in the hearts of his fellow men. It is this indissoluble association with the little troop of heroes whose fame can never die that he chose as his chief title to distinction. This is the proudest word written upon the monument which attests the appreciation and gratitude of another generation, knowing only by tradition the stern days through which he lived. His life touched its high tide when he shouted the "Charge" that sent the First Minnesota to death and glory where the Nation's future was wavering in the balance.

To-day's ceremonies would lose meaning and fail in justice if they did not make that one historic

event their center: if they did not reunite the dead and the living by joining in honor and praise the commander in whose name this monument is reared and the men who followed him ; a few of whom. In ranks more fatally thinned by time than by the bullets of the enemy, are still with us to live again that day of unfading glory. Time has detracted nothing from the achievement of the First Minnesota. The further we recede from the moment when they threw themselves without wavering into the jaws of death—the more we compare it with other feats of arms that have been celebrated in song and story—the more distinguished and incomparable it appears. It is unique not only in the history of our nation but in the records of all warfare in modern history. It is not our personal pride, or the disposition to exalt our own, but the official record that gives to the regiment which shares with its old leader to-day the affection and reverence of all, its station in the hall of earthly fame.

The day was the crisis of the War of the Rebellion, and the hour was the crisis of a memorable attempt to strike a swift, straight blow through the living body of the Union that should leave it helplessly dissevered. The whole country thrilled with comprehension of what this battle meant; of what must follow should Gettysburg have the same ending as Bull Run. Not then

would victory have found the forces of the South incapable of utilizing it to the full. Because of the danger of this supreme effort to reach the heart of the nation, Gettysburg is one of the decisive names that these four years of strife wrote indelibly into our history.

Equally significant and fateful was the moment that flashes into every man's thought and fills his heart with pride as he realizes the significance of the monument which we are here to dedicate. Like all great things, it and all that it involved were very simple. The corps of Sickles had been defeated and forced backward. To this point of disaster reinforcements were hurrying, but they would arrive too late unless the oncoming legions could be checked. Were this not done, the Union line would be practically cut in two, the army's flank turned and the day's ending could hardly be doubtful. To save it must be the work of a moment. To hold back the whole body of the enemy, supported by their batteries and wild with success and the desire of victory, only the handful of men of the First Minnesota were available. On that single chance these men staked their lives, accomplished the seemingly impossible, and decided the fortunes not only of that day but perhaps of years of war.

The glory of it is that they went down into the valley of death not doggedly, but bravely; holding

life cheap in comparison with their duty and their cause. Because of the great courage with which they faced their fate, they accomplished results out of all proportion to their numbers. There was a mental shock from the possibility of such a charge, as effective as the impact of bullet or bayonet. And so moral and physical heroism joined forces and kept the field until the critical moment had passed, the reinforcements appeared and the day was saved. Then, not broken or swallowed up, not yielding themselves prisoners, when their work was done, the small remnant of survivors, only forty-seven in all, with their colors still in their possession and their spirit unsubdued, retired because they were ordered back and their task accomplished. On that bloody field they left their colonel and every field officer either dead or wounded. There they left 215 of the 262 men who had followed the command to charge. Not a man was unaccounted for. Not one had flinched upon that terrible day.

When we place their act upon a pedestal so high and decorate it with unstinted praise we do not exaggerate the bare fact. It has been called " a feat of arms unparalleled in the annals of modern warfare " ; and such it is not only to the partial eye of friends but by the test of actual comparison. The total loss of the First Minnesota at Gettysburg was 82 per cent. The charge of

the Light Brigade at Balaklava has stood for most of the English-speaking world as the supreme effort of human valor in a forlorn hope. The "Six Hundred" of Tennyson's poem lost 37 per cent, of their number, more being taken prisoners than were killed or wounded. The Imperial Prussian Guards at Gravelotte lost 50 per cent.; the Garde-Schuetzen 46 per cent, at Metz. But never since Thermopylae has there been in a successful action such a percentage of loss as the First Minnesota sustained; never, by the most generous estimate of all the brave deeds of the past, has human courage more completely triumphed. In the procession of the heroes of all ages, the First Minnesota will march at the head of the line.

Who were these men who wrought a deed so fine and lasting? Most were American-born, but the other nationalities that have contributed most to the strength of our composite race were also represented on this roll of fame. They were men who had learned to labor and to endure. Their virtues were large, simple and candid. They saw things straight; and the struggle for existence in their daily life had taught them to do things quickly and well. There is no better making of a soldier. The members of the First Minnesota represented the furthest advance of civilization in the Northwest.

For untold generations it will bring pleasure

and pride to our descendants as it does to us all to tell this story that cannot grow old. There is no blood so cold, no heart so immersed in the world's cares that does not thrill to it. But to none can it bring" the personal touch contributed here and now by the gray hairs, the bent forms, the symbols of honorable age that greet our eyes in the survivors of what was both an age of heroes and an age of chivalry. As long as the nation lives, the memory of that great sacrifice must lend seriousness of purpose and loftiness of aim to the daily work of those who have entered into an inheritance bought with blood and self-sacrifice. As the strength and beauty of the tree grows out of the root, so from the graves of our heroes, from such memories as we are met to-day to revive from such honor as we pay to the leader before whose memorial our heads are bared, arise new civic ideals and a will to serve the Republic and keep it for the blessing of our people and the hope of all the earth.

Remembering them and their achievements, we may well be modest. We may well cultivate the qualities of simplicity and sincerity, without which men or nations may be successful but can scarcely be called great. These carried to its triumphant close the struggle that convulsed this nation. These especially marked the mightiest leader of them all, who paid to the event this day

commemorates, upon the field of Gettysburg, his tribute in words so lofty in their thought and feeling that they must always remain our model. With another of the great, simple thoughts of Abraham Lincoln we may conclude this day's ceremony, taking them with us as we turn again from the past to the present, confronting the day's work, short or long, that awaits us all: " And, having- thus chosen our course, without guile and with pure purpose, let us renew our trust in God, and go forward without fear and with manly hearts!"