

Mark Twain Essay on Francis Lightfoot Lee

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Francis Lightfoot Lee
by Mark Twain

This man's life-work was so inconspicuous, that his name would now be wholly forgotten, but for one thing – he signed the Declaration of Independence. Yet his life was a most useful and worthy one. It was a good and profitable voyage, though it left no phosphorescent splendors in its wake.

A sketch of Francis Lightfoot Lee can be useful for but one purpose, as showing what sort of material was used in the construction of congressmen in his day; since to sketch him is to sketch the average congressman of his time.

He came of an old and excellent family; a family which had borne an unsullied name, and held honorable place on both sides of the water; a family with a reputation to preserve and traditions to perpetuate; a family which could not afford to soil itself with political trickery, or do base things for party or for hire; a family which was able to shed as much honor upon official station as it received from it.

He dealt in no shams; he had no ostentations of dress or equipage; for he was, as one may say, inured to wealth. He had always been used to it. His own ample means were inherited. He was educated. He was more than that – he was finely cultivated. He loved books; he had a good library, and no place had so great a charm for him as that. The old Virginia mansion which was his home was also the home of that old-time Virginian hospitality which hoary men still hold in mellow memory. Over their port and walnuts he and his friends of the gentry discussed a literature which is dead and forgotten now, and political matters which were drowsy with the absence of corruption and "investigations." Sundays he and they drove to church in their lumbering coaches, with a due degree of grave and seemly pomp. Week-days they inspected their domains, ordered their affairs, attended to the needs of their dependents, consulted with their overseers and tenants, busied themselves with active benevolences. They were justices of the peace, and performed their unpaid duties with arduous and honest diligence, and with serene, unhampered impartiality toward a society to which they were not beholden for their official stations. In short, Francis Lightfoot Lee was a gentleman – a word which meant a great deal in his day, though it means nothing whatever in ours.

Mr. Lee defiled himself with no juggling, or wire-pulling, or begging, to acquire a place in the provincial legislature, but went thither when he was called, and went reluctantly. He wrought there industriously during four years, never seeking his own ends, but only the public's. His course was purity itself, and he retired unblemished when his work was done. He retired gladly, and sought his home and its superior allurements. No one dreamed of such a thing as "investigating" him.