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REBELLION LAY IN HIS WAY

Written by the late Liza Erskine, granddaughter, based on Robert Erskine's memoirs.

Grandfather Erskine's photograph used to hang in the schoolroom of the first house I remember, which was a pleasant, ordinary Manse on what were then the outskirts of Belfast. The photograph was of a gentleman in a magnificent but not immediately recognisable uniform. I learned later that he was dressed as "an Honorary Colonel on the Head Quarter Staff of the Grand Army of the Republic at Washington" and that this was an Old Boys' Association of the men who had fought on the Northern side in the American Civil War. I learned too that my grandfather had had the photograph taken after his doctor had told him that he had only a few months to live. When I was a child I thought this story depressing, and I thought the huge sepia-coloured photograph from which the handsome face looked blankly down depressing also. It was not until quite recently when I found pushed in behind a lexicon on my father's shelves a dusty old box file full of the yellowing pages of Memoirs my grandfather had written about what he called "this wild adventure of his boyhood" that I realised that he had been by no means the military tailor's dummy I had supposed.

His good looks have always been a legend in the family, but I had had no idea until I read the Memoirs that he had been so high-spirited and gay. He was obstinate, too, but then he was also kind, uncomplicated and impulsive. His worst fault was probably his unmanageably hot temper, but the few people who now remember him – he died in 1910 – dwell much more upon his charm of manner, his incurable passion for fishing and the fact that he could do anything with either horses or dogs. Altogether he was a tearaway Charles Lever Irishman, and it was from this hot-headedness that most of his troubles sprang.

His parents had died when he was very young and he was brought up by an uncle who belonged to a hyper-Calvinistic religious sect called the Covenanters. "The rigid strictness of the Covenanter discipline" irked the boy unendurably, and "though he could not help but respect its followers" this did not prevent him quarrelling with his uncle more and more frequently. He did not care for his school either: "the hours were from ten till two and from four till six" and my grandfather detested having his day chopped up in this way. When he left school he was apprenticed to a Mr. Robert Atkinson, but this

arrangement did not last long. "He determined to remain Boss" says my grandfather "so I emigrated to Canada". There he joined his brother John, who had "the best dry goods store in London, Ontario, and was looked upon as a big pot" and for a time things went very well. Gradually, however, and largely my grandfather thought because he told several of his brother's hands that John and he were "the sons of a respectable man who kept a grocer's shop in Belfast and not the sons of Lord Yahoo" relationships worsened. "I realised" says my grandfather "that he would like to see the heel of my stocking at the earliest moment". The time soon came. John doubted my grandfather's explanation of some cuts and bruises caused by a sleighing accident, and my grandfather, smarting with injustice, flung out of the dry goods store in a red-hot rage. He went to Buffalo. There he got a job and made several very good friends, all of whom remain anonymous except two excitable German brothers – Peter and Alex Kirsch – and an inordinately fat boy called Charlie Parker. They were good-hearted if a little wild and they rubbed along well enough "doing the best they could", my grandfather taking any chances he got of shooting and fishing off Strawberrie Island in the Niagara River.

Meantime, the forces of the Southern Confederacy had fired on the Stars and Stripes at Fort Sumter, President Lincoln had called for "militia of the Union to the number of seventy-five thousand" and the Civil War had begun. My grandfather and his cronies, none of whom was American-born, at first saw no reason to participate in the Brothers' War. Things began to go very badly for the North, however, and Uncle Sam was in despair for troops. So impassioned were his appeals for men that one idle and fateful evening my grandfather suggested that he might even welcome the spherical Charlie Parker. Alex Kirsch then "dared" Charlie to go to the Recruiting Office. Charlie placidly agreed, tossing over his shoulder as he rolled away the remark "But if I get taken you fellows must come too". "Yeah, sure", they replied and settled down to await his return. He did not come back, so rather uneasily they went to see what had happened. They found of course that Charlie had had to enlist and that they were obliged to keep their bargain with him.

Charlie Parker, the catalyst, then disappears from the narrative – presumably he joined some other arm of the service. My grandfather it is hardly necessary to say joined a Cavalry Regiment, and Peter and Alex Kirsch went with him. They trained hurriedly at Fort Porter and went to the Front, dressed as Cavalry but forced because horses could not be found for them to act as Infantry. This made them "the laughing-stock of the entire Army in their vicinity", which put my grandfather out very much indeed. He liked being called a member of "The Shank's Mare Regiment" or "The 2nd New York Dismounted Rifles" even less than most of his comrades. And not only were they exasperated by this "chaff" but they did hate having to walk – "had they for a moment imagined that they would have had to do so it is quite certain that two-thirds of the regiment would not have joined". They were so angry that in the end they mutinied.

> "When the summer campaign was nearly over we gave notice that unless we got our horses we would stack our arms on a given day and decline to act as Infantry soldiers any longer. This we actually did. In reply, General Burnside, who was in command of the 9th Corps, sent word that if we refused to retake our arms before twelve o'clock he was treat us as guilty of mutiny, and he ordered two batteries of Artillery to cover us. When we saw the guns getting into position we were not long getting into line and retaking our rifles. Whether he would have given the command to fire is very doubtful, but one thing is certain – no Volunteer Artillery would have obeyed such orders if he had".

These were strong measures, but they were successful. The regiment was taken from the first line of breastworks and got its horses about a fortnight later. "It must sound strange conduct" says my grandfather indulgently, "but we were only volunteers, playing soldiers for as long as we wanted".

Certainly my grandfather's Company does sound both friendly and amateurish – "chummy" is his word. Their Captain was little use – silly and vain and in my grandfather's view "much too clever to be in the Army". He carried a splendid silver-plated sixteen shooting repeating rifle but "he could always tell when a fight was coming off and could take a fever, which was worth any money to him".

During the Captain's absences the Company was commanded by its aptly-named Lieutenant Swift, who, like my grandfather, was about eighteen at this time. He had dash and patriotic ardour and making war upon the enemies of the Union was a breath of life to him. It was he who welded a polyglot and colourful agglomeration of individualists into a fighting unit and my grandfather loyally opined that "he could have handled a brigade as readily". It is pleasant to record that Lieut. Swift survived the War to become in his later years a distinguished Judge and that he and my grandfather remained friends all their lives.

My grandfather was Orderly Sergeant – evidently because he could read and write. The Drill Sergeant was one of the Regiment's several deserters from the British Army in Canada. This man, Frank Smith, "wanted to have some fighting and left his regiment in Toronto with the idea of returning in case he was not shot". The Northern Army welcomed these well-trained fire-eaters and in fact there was an efficient though illegal organisation "members of which negotiated with likely deserters, provided them with civilian clothes and arranged for their transport by horse or wagon to points on the River Niagara from which they were ferried over to American soil in boatloads of six or eight".

There must have been Americans in the Company, but my grandfather hardly mentions them – probably because they were the norm. There were three Dutchmen, two of whom knew so little English that they misunderstood orders one day and go up on top of the breastworks "and walked backwards and forwards making cockshots of themselves for the Confederate sharpshooters for ten or fifteen minutes "before someone thought to tell my grandfather what was happening".

The other Dutchman, Henri Bunke, was "small and strong as a bull and always prepared to sell his horse for a consideration". The horses were the Government's property and branded "US" on the shoulder. Each man got a horse by ballot and at his discharge had to return a horse – any horse – with a "US" brand. "No matter what the vices of the horse you got in the ballot you had to keep him unless someone else in the Company would trade with you. Bunke got the best horse in the Company which as soon as the horses

were saddled and tried passed to someone else, so before the day ended he had a black horse with a weak back, a good few dollars and a pair of homemade new boots, five horses having passed through his hands. This black horse, however "rusted" at the sound of artillery. Nothing would make it go towards the gunfire and Bunke had to go to the rear and act as a Cook until he got the horse condemned and exchanged". ("The best horse in the Company" – the one Bunke started with – became my grandfather's own mount Reindeer, who was "very fast and very much the colour of his namesake" and to whom my grandfather was devoted).

There were a number of Germans in the Company. My grandfather "did not consider them smart, but they were brave and obedient and made good soldiers – though they would probably have done better in a German regiment like the one at Petersburg to whose Dress Parades other regiments used to go in order to see a performance like a well-oiled piece of machinery". In addition there were the Kirsch brothers – inseparable, lively and highly-strong but "good and reliable soldiers who went through the campaign without being a day absent" and who after the War got jobs in Buffalo City Hall and turned into diligent solid citizens.

Then there were the veterans like Colour Sergeant Lane, who was an English Pensioner – "a very old man, hard as iron and straight as a rush" – and wore Crimean and Indian Mutiny medals on his tunic; and Mick Coates who had been wounded at Fair Oaks and Antietam and who, having served the term of his contract had re-enlisted with his regiment.

(These contracts were a source of great unrest and dissatisfaction. At first Volunteers were asked to serve for three months or one year, but as the War dragged on the time was extended first to "two years" then to "three years or the duration of the War". "Great complaints were made by regiments at the front whose time had expired that the Government had broken faith with them. They held, and I think properly so, that when their term of service was up they were civilians, not soldiers, and should have been relieved and sent home, but of course this was impossible, and time and time again

regiments were sent into the very thick of the fight when they should have been at home at their own firesides").

The men in my grandfather's unit were to start with ludicrously raw – "the city type who had never fired a shot at a target or loaded a rifle till the day they faced the enemy" – but they were able veterans by the time the War ended. Their opponents were General Stuart's Cavalry, regarded by many people (including themselves) as the cream of the Confederate Army; aristocratic and courageous young men accustomed to ride and shoot almost all their lives. Mounted on their thoroughbreds – "the horses in Virginia especially" says my grandfather wistfully "were of the best English blood" – they rode rings round their plebeian adversaries, some of whom "could hardly sit on a horse with comfort". "It was no unusual trick of theirs" says my grandfather "when in Northern territory to go to a telegraph station and wire the Northern Cavalry Commander to proceed immediately to some point exactly opposite that by which they intended to escape", which is precisely the kind of prank Prince Rupert's Cavaliers would have enjoyed.

The 2nd New York Mounted Rifles were no match for such daring. Their men on their first march "could hardly return their sabres to their scabbards without pricking the horse of the man next to them and found it very difficult to mount their horses, especially if wearing spurs". They had little chance to become more proficient before they had to defend themselves against an enemy attack "as that of mad men". Without thinking greatly about it they "aimed their rifles, pulled their triggers at the word of command as they had done unloaded in drill". This was different, however. "I think" says my grandfather "that the first volley was the best and most deadly we ever fired, but the noise panicked many of our own men".

They were involved in innumerable skirmishes and in two of the major battles – The Battle of the Seven Days and the Siege of Richmond, during which they were at Petersburg, the advanced post. When they were not in action they patrolled, made raids

on forage wagons, did picket duty or pulled up railway lines. They seem to have been experts at this and their methods are described in detail:-

> "About every twenty yards the nuts were unscrewed and a break made. Then with levers one side was lifted up and everything that would come turned turtle. If possible the sleepers were set on fire and the rails twisted in the heat. On an embankment" adds my grandfather with evident relish "we could work on longer lengths and throw the whole thing down the bank. As a rule, though, we did not get long at this sort of work – a few shells lighting near told us that the infantry were coming and that it was time for us to skedaddle".

About picket duty he was less enthusiastic because it so often he said "meant prisoner of war". It involved being sent forward into the enemy's country to obtain information about dispositions with the possibility of being picked off by "a gorilla". "I know of nothing so trying on me on a dark night as sitting for two hours with my eyes gazing between my horse's ears". He does add though that "no matter how dark it may be, if you can see your horse's ears he will let you know of danger, because no enemy can approach without being heard by the horse who will cock his ears and then you may look out for anything and everything. Many a picket line has been driven in by hares or wild pigs".

They had a great deal of misery and discomfort – organisation was sometimes bad and equipment scarce. But their worst enemy was hunger and its concomitant, dysentery. "It is not every stomach that will stand raw beef and water covered with green scum". My grandfather never forgot the day he stole corn (not, he is careful to point out, oats) "from a team of mules, fighting the teamster for a handful and eating it as he ran away from his whip". There were better times of course. Sometimes they shot game or wild boar or rabbit, and sometimes they had a cow "beloved by the entire Company and fed on grass, hay and oats". Generally, however, their diet on the march was intolerably monotonous and the Memoirs are full of recipes for making hard tack and salt pork interesting.

During the last five weeks of the War, by which time they were at Petersburg "there was not five minutes at a time cessation from rifle firing … A continual zip, zip, zip of bullets in course of flight. The sound was generally interpreted as the ball saying 'I want you-…u'". It was at this time that my grandfather crossed "the most expensive bridge for the size of it I ever heard of … One gun carriage had sunk into a swamp and it was impossible to get the guns forward without something in the shape of a bridge. There was no timber available and Orderly after Orderly was coming with the orders 'get the guns forward'. It was then that someone hit on the idea of laying a couple of wagon loads of new Enfield rifles crossways and lengthways over this ten or twelve feet of swamp. They took the weight of the guns which were pushed over, and the horses, which had waded through further down, limbered up and off to action".

Towards the end of this last battle the Confederates ran out of ammunition so "they commenced to fire railroad iron. The sound that this makes passing through the air is horrible. However, most of it passed over our heads and stuck into the ground like great arrows". Even the railroad iron did not deter the Federal troops who were now carrying everything before them. "We knew we were winning, which makes a great difference in the fighting qualifications". On what turned out to be the second last day of the War this "unflinching butchery" became too much for a number of the Federal Artillery Officers and they commanded their batteries to cease firing. My grandfather comments sadly on the hundreds of Southern troops who lost their lives in the last 24 hours of the War.

The account of the surrender at Appomatox Court House next day is too well known to repeat. Everyone – with the exception according to my grandfather of some Southern prisoners of war – was relieved that the bitter conflict was over, and the magnanimity of the North needs no bush. In the Memoirs there is one delightful postscript to these tragic and stirring events:-

> "After the end of the war our regiment was sent to a district in Virginia on police duty, which was principally to see that the negroes were not ill-treated and that those who wished could leave their old masters and work where they pleased. We rode out from time to time on patrol and were

> always anxious to trade what we had to spare – usually coffee, tea and salt – for milk, butter, fowl or eggs. One afternoon I arrived with three men at a mansion on the verandah of which three ladies sat. Riding up, we removed our caps and asked if they would trade eggs or butter for tea or coffee. The old lady, who was the mother of the other two, was delighted at this and we dismounted and displayed our wares. She ordered coffee for us all; a coloured boy took our horses to the stable and we got into conversation with the daughters, which was very agreeable for us".

The little party was a success. The ladies had not tasted coffee for three years and the soldiers found the addition of boiled milk a great improvement. They got on so well that my grandfather gave the ladies the remainder of the goods they had had for trading and they all stayed to dinner, at which they met the old lady's two sons. They had been in the Confederate Army and that afternoon had been trying to get some crops in with bullocks for ploughing as all their horses had been captured years before. Sitting out on the verandah after the dinner the men fought over again many of the battles of the War and when at last the visitors had to go back to Camp they took with them butter and eggs and an invitation to come back the following week. They left behind two of their horses to help with the ploughing.

They visited this household every week taking each time two fresh horses to relieve the two the US Army had unwittingly lent out "and a nicer family" says my grandfather "it was never my lot to be in". I wish I could say that he swept one of these elegant Virginian ladies off her feet and brought her back to Northern Ireland to be my grandmother, but nothing so romantic occurred. The Regiment left the district and he had to go with it – very reluctantly and after having attended a dance given by the family at which Federal and Confederate uniforms were worn – and these charming enemies are not mentioned again in the Memoirs. Perhaps by the time he had met them my grandfather had already fallen in love with the Italian Countess who is said by family legend to have been his first wife.

(When he returned to Northern Ireland it was all rather humdrum. He lived with his Covenanting uncle again and started a shop in Belfast. It was a mild success. He got married and settled down and looked just like thousands of other provincial businessmen. But, like Yeats' old man, he had a sword upstairs and when he too was old and waiting for Death he used to sit in his summerhouse dreaming about his boyish adventure and writing his recollections of it in pencil in fat tuppenny notebooks. Perhaps he glanced up from time to time at the Holywood Hills but saw in his mind's eye the pleasant pastures of Virginia and heard with the ear of the imagination the clopper-clopper of horses' hooves and the clink and jangle of military accoutrements).

However that may be it is certain that the Memoirs were written towards the end of my grandfather's life, and although he declared that "writing was not in his way" it is obvious that he greatly enjoyed compiling them. Sometimes "as memories flashed upon him and scenes were reborn before his eyes" his pencil moved so rapidly across the pages of his notebooks that the writing is almost illegible. When he had finished and the notes had been transcribed, he got out green, red and black inks and wrote with decorative flourishes on the spine of the box file:-

IMPRESSIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS

-of-

THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

-by-

AN ALIEN VOLUNTEER

So, satisfied that his descendants would know that he had taken a hand in making history, he put the file carefully away. Perhaps he then went fishing, and he may have seen as he cast his glistening fly not the peaty water of his own stream in County Down, but the Niagara River where the fishing off Strawberrie Island had been so good when he had been young and his wildest adventure had been still before him.