DODD IRA SEYMOUR

THE SONG OF THE RAPPAHANNOCK

Ira Dodd

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Dodd I.

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Содержание

Preface 5
The Song of the Rappahannock 6
The Making of a Regiment 13
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 18

Ira Seymour Dodd
The Song of the Rappahannock
Sketches of the Civil War

Preface

What is herein written was begun and for the most part completed before the Spanish War Cloud was more than a distant and doubtful threat.

But out of its passing storm a rainbow arch has risen, fairer and sweeter than even the sunshine of victory to the eyes of those who stood in opposing ranks as foemen thirty years ago. We learned, not hatred, but profound respect for each other on those grimly fought fields of Civil Strife. During these years of retrospect and reflection the respect has been ripening into a warmer feeling; and now our hearts swell with deep and solemn thankfulness for the open evidence of our perfect welding into One Mighty Nation under whose Old Flag men of the South stand joined with men of the North in invincible brotherhood.

Henceforth memories of that older crisis can no longer be dividing or exclusive possessions, but each fragment of its story becomes part of the common heritage of American manhood.

To the kindness of the Editors of "McClure's Magazine," in which several of the sketches composing this little book first appeared, the author desires to express his obligations.

I. S. D.

Riverdale on the Hudson
October 1, 1898.

The Song of the Rappahannock

The Song has been silent for more than thirty years. In another thirty years it will cease to be a living memory save to a handful of very old men. But those who once heard can never forget its weird, fantastic, sinister tones. Sometimes it was a fearful yet persuasive whisper addressed to you personally; again it would burst in uncontrolled passion into a chorus of awful and discordant screams mingled with thunderous and reverberating roar. With marvellous range of tone and expression it was, however, always one Song with one fateful burden.

I was a young soldier of the Army of the Potomac in those days; one of the several thousand who wore the white cross of the Second Division of the Sixth Army Corps, and the Song in all its variations became a familiar sound.

For instance, once when we were occupying the hills north of the Rappahannock, nearly half the regiment were on the sick list by reason of the bad water which supplied our camp. Down by the river bank, perhaps a mile and a half away was a spring of good clear water. "Joe" and myself, both non-commissioned officers, thought we must at all hazards keep fit for duty, and on alternate mornings one of us would make the trip to fill our canteens. Wide and open fields lay between us and the spring and I think I never crossed that open space without hearing the Song. Preceding a distant detonation from beyond the river a faint quavering whistle would come, growing louder as with apparently increasing hurry it drew near. It seemed to speak in fascinating, insinuating tone of some very special message to you alone; then suddenly, with venomous buzz in your very ear while your heart stood still it would speed by and die away again in the farther distance. It was the voice of a minié bullet from the rifle of some sharpshooter on the Confederate picket line. But the range was long, the risk slight, as such things went, and not to be compared, so Joe and I thought, to the very real danger of the camp water.

Toward evening one of our field batteries would gallop down to the river bank and open fire upon those troublesome sharpshooters; then the heavy guns on the other side would make reply and a new variation of the Song would be heard – a very Wagnerian orchestral effect: the quick crack of the field guns, the more distant boom of the siege cannon, the scream of shells rushing hither and thither through the evening air, always with that rising and falling cadence, that mournful moan, that peculiar hurrying, threatening, almost speaking quaver which, once heard goes with you evermore, so that years afterwards you hear it in your dreams.

Those big shells from the enemy's guns three miles away made regular evening visits to our camp. They seldom did any real harm. When we first occupied the position, a few tents were pitched too near the crest of the hill within sight of the gunners beyond; but after one of those tents had been torn to rags and the head of a poor fellow standing near had been neatly shorn off, everything came down behind the slope out of view; and though we were always favoured with our vesper serenade and close calls were not uncommon, no one else, I think, was seriously hurt.

The evening performance had, if not an appreciative, certainly a grimly critical audience. A veteran in the adjoining regiment calmly proceeds with the all-important business of boiling his coffee until a shell explodes uncomfortably close. Then you hear his disgusted growl: "The damned rascals! They spoil my supper every night!" and the answering jeer of his comrades: "Jim, did you hear what that one said? It said, 'Which 'un, which 'un, which 'un, *you*!'"

The ring of the bursting shells was not the least impressive of the notes of the Song. It is hard to describe; but strange as it may seem to say so it was certainly music, often with absolutely sweet tones like the sudden stroke of a bell, followed by the singing hum, in curious harmony of the rushing of jagged iron fragments through the air. One of the friends of my boyhood was a musical genius, a pianist of no mean power who had studied his profession in Germany. The democratic makeup of our army is illustrated by the fact that, in the early sixties this man enlisted as a private soldier.

And he used to amuse himself while lying in the trenches by noting the varying keys of the music of moaning and bursting shells.

But the Song was not always harmless or ineffectual. No one knows precisely how many men suffered wounds and death beside the banks of the pretty, placid Rappahannock. It is within bounds to put the number at fifty thousand. The war history of that region is peculiar. It is a tale of incessant and resultless strife, seldom without at least the intermittent fire of opposing picket lines. Three of the greatest, most deadly, yet most indecisive battles of the war were fought there.

The veil of time has begun to fall over the actual agonies of the nation while the fury of that great war tempest lingered; but some of us remember how real it was, and the Song of the Rappahannock seems its very voice. It was Delphic in the ambiguity of its utterance. Neither the pæan of victory nor the wail of the conquered, it was the breath of the Titanic struggle with its bitter pain, its dark suspense, its grim and terrible stress and strain.

In early May, that sweet season when in Virginia springtime is just passing into summer, we came to the banks of the Rappahannock, ready to take our destined share in the battle of Chancellorsville. The river was no stranger: we had formed its intimate acquaintance in December during the bloody days of Fredericksburg; and now, separated from the main body of the army which had crossed about fifteen miles above, we found ourselves once more facing the old battle-ground with its familiar sleepy town, its wide fields and amphitheatre of gentle hills spread out in portentous panorama before us. Peace seemed to have settled down upon the scene, blotting out all memory of strife; yet we knew the semblance was but a mocking phantasm, for our comrades of the First Corps stirred up a very hornet's nest of enemies and had a sharp brush before they could lay their pontoon bridge. And though with this exception the Song was ominously silent in our front, we could hear its distant voice from up the river.

On one day it rose into an angry roar, and immediately afterward the First Corps received marching orders, went filing past us along the river road toward the sound of the Song, and the Sixth was left alone. On Saturday night our time came. It was a lovely evening full of the breath of spring-time; but our hearts were very solemn as, in the darkness and in sternly enforced silence our lines crept across the pontoon bridge out into the fields full of the ghosts of December's awful sacrifices and finally, with rifles loaded and with battle provision of sixty rounds of cartridge to every man, we halted before the spectral outlines of the Fredericksburg hills.

Then in low tones the order passed from company to company: "Lie down where you are. Let every man keep his gun by his side. Do not take off any of your equipments; do not even loosen your belts. Keep silence!"

A battery moves like a group of shadows out a little way to the front; we can hear the subdued orders of the officers; the unlimbering and loading of the guns; and then all is quiet along the Rappahannock. Beyond the guns we know there are pickets whose duty it is to wake and watch; but soon all along the inner lines the May moon shines peacefully on rows of sleeping men. By to-morrow night many of them will lie very quiet in another and a deeper sleep.

Dawn comes soon in May, and the first gray light brought the Song. With hum and buzz like that of ghostly insects the bullets came stealing over from the enemy's skirmish line. It was a grim awakening and its first impression inexpressibly mournful. Each singing bullet seemed to chant a dirge – and the morning air held a very graveyard chill. Swearing is a common dialect with soldiers, but not an oath was heard as that morning Song began. Everyone was solemn; we were thinking of home and of loved ones, and there was a great despairing sense of separation in our hearts. I think almost any man who has seen war would tell the same story and count those moments of the skirmish firing in the gray dawn on the brink of battle among the most gloomy of his life.

But hark! The batteries are opening fire, the Song is bursting into fuller voice; and up and down the line orders ring out sharply, "Attention, battalion!" There is movement now, it brings life and dispels the gloom. There is marching and countermarching for better position and soon the line is

placed in a sunken road whose banks protect us against the enemy's shot and shell, while just behind, on slightly higher ground our own batteries fire over our heads. And so the morning passes; the Song, never silent sometimes swells out clamorously; and anon it sinks to intermittent growls.

Suddenly, about noontime, there is a restless movement along the line; staff officers are galloping furiously hither and thither; something is in the air. We are ordered to unsling our knapsacks and pile them together. Meantime our batteries open a furious fire. The men say to each other, "The bulldogs are barking, and our turn is coming!" And as the Song swells with their baying, by quick orders our line is formed for the charge. We must storm those hills flaming with the fire of the Confederate cannons. A few breathless moments that seem like hours, and suddenly our batteries cease fire, the expected order is given, and the line surges forward.

I make no attempt to tell how the Sixth Corps on that Sunday morning won the Fredericksburg heights, storming successfully though with fearful loss, the very same works from which the army had been beaten back in December.

I am not a military critic, I can tell only what one very young and obscure soldier saw and felt.

I was a serjeant, and on that day my especial duty was that of "left general guide." The regiment was comparatively new and raw, and in our rush across the rough ploughed fields under the awful fire of the enemy's batteries we were thrown into some confusion. With great presence of mind our lieutenant-colonel halted us, ordered the men to lie down, and then called for "guides on a line." That meant that I and the two other guides, one on the right and one in the centre, were to stand up and take position by which the regiment could align itself. I sprang to my feet, soon caught the line from the others, and there we stood while the regiment crawled up and "dressed" by us. It was a trying situation; and the Song! it was deafening. The air was full of wild shrieks of grape and shrapnel; the ringing shells were bursting all about with maddening and stunning detonations. I remember, as I stood there for those few moments I seemed indeed to have lost all sense of fear, and yet I wondered whether I was actually myself and whether my head was really on or off my shoulders.

Then, as we raced forward once more and neared the enemy's position, I remember that at regular intervals bullets would strike close to my feet and throw stinging little showers of gravel in my face. I thought little of it at the time, but among the prisoners captured were some sharpshooters who had been posted off at our left; and when I heard how those fellows had bragged about the number of shots they had fired at individual officers in our regiment, then I understood. My place as guide had brought me into view, and one of those skirmishers had tried to pick me off but had each time made a little too much allowance for my running.

When we neared the face of the hill against which our charge was directed the storm of fire first went harmlessly over our heads, then it ceased; and stumbling through a thicket of brush and felled trees, we came suddenly upon a great, frowning earthwork. How its yellow sides loomed up! And just over its edge the muzzles of two great brass guns gaped at us; but everything within was silent as death. The same thought flashed through every mind. "They are lying low for us, and presently we shall look into the barrels of a row of rifles and receive their deadly volley at this short range!" For an instant the regiment as one man recoiled and faltered. Then a serjeant from one of the centre companies stepped forth. I can see him now, a handsome, fair-haired young fellow. With cool and quiet voice he called, "Boys, let's see what's inside of this thing!" and straight up the slope of the yellow mound he started and the regiment followed with a cheer. We found a deserted fort. It had been outflanked by the regiment on our right. They received from another side the volley which we narrowly missed and it laid low more than a hundred of their men. Away to our right, all along the line the charge had been successful and the heights of Fredericksburg were won.

Is there any intoxication like the joy of victory? For the moment men forget everything else: fatigue, thirst, wounds, dead and suffering comrades, the parting shots of fleeing foe. But it is a short-lived joy; at least ours was, for the victory had been costly and there were sad gaps in the ranks of all

the regiments as we reformed on the crest of the hills. Moreover, our work was but begun. The Sixth Corps had been ordered to join Hooker by cutting a road for itself through Lee's army.

Regaining our knapsacks, we were speedily on the march, the First Division now in the advance, as ours, the Second, had been in the morning. Ghastly sights met us as we passed through the old town where the Light Division had charged; almost every house showed marks of shot or shell, and here and there on the sidewalks or at street corners, in the hot sunshine lay the dead bodies of poor heroes whose last battle was fought. I remember how almost always some comrade's friendly hand had pulled the corner of a blanket over their swollen and blackening faces. On we went leaving the town behind, marching along a well-made high-road into a country of small fields set in the midst of dense and scrubby pine woods and the afternoon was wearing away when suddenly, from the direction in which we were going, out of those mysterious thickets of pine came the Song.

This time there was no prelude of cracking rifles and whispering bullets; but, as though some mighty hand smote at once all the bass notes of a great organ the cannonade roared out, swelling louder and louder all along our front. Soon we reached an open field where an ammunition train was parked and here we were halted to rest and replenish our cartridge boxes while the fierce roar of the Song still thundered until, as we were thus busied, there was a hush – one of those instant and ominous silences which smite the heart more loudly than any sound: the Song did not die away, it stopped. And then, after a breathless moment a new movement of the symphony began. Like the pattering roar of rain after thunder, or like the long roll from a hundred tenor drums it swept along and swelled out until the woods responsive seemed to vibrate to its rattle. It was the file-fire of the line of battle. We could see nothing, not even the smoke through the dense forest; we could only listen. "Hark!" said an old soldier standing near me. "D' ye hear that? Bullets this time: Them's the little things that kills!"

But swiftly now we are on the march again, pressing toward the sound of the Song. And soon the wounded begin to appear, making their way past us toward the rear by the side paths of the road on which we march; every moment their numbers increase until we find ourselves marching between two ghastly lines of wounded men: only a detachment from the growing company of the victims of the Song, only those who can walk. But there were gruesome sights in that procession of pain. Here a man holding up his hand across which a bullet has ploughed a bloody track; there one with a ragged hole through his cheek; then an officer leaning on two other men, both wounded, the ashy hue of death on his face and the blood streaming from his breast. This is no picture of the imagination. I am telling things that I saw, things that burned themselves into my memory; and I remember that every one of those wounded men whether his hurt were great or small, was pale as death and wore a fixed expression, not of terror but of stony despair. They all walked slowly and wearily and if you asked one of them, "How is the battle going?" you got the invariable answer, "Our regiment is all cut to pieces;" and they said it in a tone of tired reproach as though you ought to know and had insulted them by asking, or else with an inflection which meant, "Presently you will catch it yourselves." It was a procession of spectres and cold cheer it furnished for us, hurrying forward toward the ever-nearing and now frightful tones of the Song; yet I think the emotion uppermost in our minds was not precisely fear but a sort of awful curiosity: we burned to see as well as hear the dreadful mystery beyond the pines; the Song seemed to come from a deadly but luring siren whose call we must obey.

But night was now coming fast and all the ways began to darken; and just when we expected to emerge into the heart of battle, as though an invisible conductor had suddenly raised his wand, as abruptly as it began the Song ceased and there was a great silence. We had heard though we had not seen the fight at Salem Church, a bitterly contested but drawn battle in which many hundreds of brave men fell. The Sixth Corps had begun to feel the weight of Lee's army.

The night which followed was one of those sweet nights of early summer when earth seems not to sleep, but to unloosen her bands and lie down to play with her merry brood of new-born children. Yet there was strange mystery abroad: everywhere a weird sound – was it of sorrow or of foreboding, nature's wail or nature's warning? It seemed to mingle both as the May moon shone down on those

who died to-day and those who were to die to-morrow. I have often heard the spirit-like cry of the whippoorwill, but never as I heard it that night. It came from every tree and bush, from every side and all around until it pervaded all the air. Perhaps I thought more of it because I was not one of the fortunate ones who could sleep undisturbed. The first serjeant was among the missing, the second serjeant had to take his duty and I was obliged to act as "commissary," rouse a detail of sleepy and unwilling men, stumble through the fields with them until we found the supply train and bring back a load of rations for the company; but I never hear a whippoorwill that I do not think of that night.

In the morning we found a little brook near our lines; it was a welcome friend; it offered us water for coffee and for a much-needed wash and its banks were speedily lined with chaffing, gossiping, half-dressed soldiers. But the coffee-pots had scarce begun to send their grateful fragrance through the lines when that monotonously awful Song broke forth again. From the hills in our rear which we had victoriously assaulted yesterday, came screaming shells from an enemy's battery. Our breakfast was cut short: "Fall in, men!" "Attention, battalion!" The orders flew from rank to rank, and soon the lines were formed. A pleasant Virginia mansion stood on rising ground near by, and the pretty lawn in front offered a good position which was speedily taken by one of our batteries, the horses ruthlessly trampling down the flowers and shrubbery; and there before that peaceful home the war-dogs began their baying answer to the hostile shots. Meantime the regiments were in motion and as we crossed a field below the house its fleeing occupants went by us. I was near enough to see them closely: an intelligent-looking man with his fair, pale wife and two little children. They were friends of our foes, but every heart ached for them and we let them pass in respectful silence. I noticed that the man's face bore the same set, despairing expression that I had seen the day before in the faces of the wounded men. A new and horrid discord sounded in the Song as that sad little company went by.

The firing soon ceased; but all the morning we marched and counter-marched taking up first one, then another position, while now and then in the valleys below we caught glimpses of the brown ranks of the Confederates who seemed pouring in from all sides. The situation was evident even to us in the ranks. Hooker had abandoned the Sixth Corps and Lee was concentrating all his available force to crush us. Things looked desperate. I remember that Joe tried all day to keep the bearings of the river in mind, and proposed that, if worst came to worst we should, even under fire attempt to swim it rather than go to Andersonville.

But the day passed quietly, all the afternoon we lay in a little field with woods on three sides, in apparent security and the men talked and joked and laughed as though battles were a far-off story. Thus time wore on, until toward evening a distant cannon shot sounded; then another, and a spent shell came harmlessly over the tree-tops tumbling end over end to the ground; and then, all at once, pandemonium seemed let loose. It was the Song in another of its wild and wonderful variations. As yesterday at Salem Church there was no prelude of skirmish fire; but unlike yesterday's evening Song, this did not begin with the growl of the bulldogs. All instruments of wrath and war seemed taking part in it, and it came, not from our front alone but from the right, from the left, from the woods before us; while out in the open space a battery of ours was savagely firing at an enemy we could not see. Quickly but quietly we formed in line. Even now I can see my dear comrade, Serjeant W – , passing along the company front counting off the files in his grave, careful way. Then he took his place next the captain, and I saw him no more: he fell in the battle, a noble young Christian, with a wife and child waiting for him in the far-away home to which he never returned.

Presently our orders came, and we moved at double-quick past the wood out into a larger field which sloped gently toward a dry ditch and then rose in the same manner on the farther side. Coming over the opposite crest of the slope, in full view was a brigade of the enemy; another body of them was well up into the wood in front of the field we were leaving; beside us now was our battery already mentioned: we could hear the captain shouting his orders for the timing of the shells in seconds and half-seconds. It was getting too hot for him: his horses were beginning to fall and to save his guns he was, as we passed him, calling out to his men to "limber up and be off."

Every incident of that scene is wonderfully vivid to me even to-day. I was conscious of none of "the frenzy of battle," but, instead, every sense seemed more than naturally quickened. I remember that, as we entered the larger field and the panorama of war opened full before me and the Song roared its diapason I thought and said to myself, "How inexpressibly grand this is!" And I noticed everything: the very colour of the ground and of the evening light and the brown ranks of the oncoming foe; and a little tragedy that was being enacted at one side, which I always think of as illustrative of the sort of stuff which was to be found in that old Army of the Potomac and of the grit which makes the Anglo-Saxon the hardest of all men to conquer. A small regiment of veterans, either a Maine or a Wisconsin regiment – I never certainly knew which – was in that field, and as we came near they were being outflanked by the enemy who were penetrating the woods at close range. Their position was untenable, they were suffering severely and the regulation move for them would have been to fall back; but instead they deliberately changed front and moved up nearer, wheeling slowly by battalion, not an easy manœuvre even on the parade ground; and they did it without ceasing or even slackening their fire; and all the while they had to close up the gaps left in their ranks by men who were dropping, dropping, dropping, to the savage fire of the foe.

I suppose the commander of the division thought such raw troops as we, fit only for sacrifice. At any rate, we were rushed to the bottom of the field and posted in the ditch to check the onset of a Confederate brigade as best we might. It is needless to say that we suffered severely, or that we could hold our desperate position only for a little while. But our fire must have told, for the enemy swerved to the right as we opened on them; yet they kept coming on and soon began to outflank us.

The same strange intensity of perception with which I entered the field stayed with me and photographed its scenes upon my mind. I can see the man several files away, just too far for me to reach, who vexed me because in his excitement he would, every time he fired shoot before he aimed with his rifle pointed toward the sky; and little S – , a boy whom we were all fond of, shot through the body yet coolly walking off toward the rear saying, "Well, boys, I'm hit!" And I can hear our brave but eccentric lieutenant-colonel shouting: "Give it to them! Give them Blissom!" And I remember that just above my head there seemed to be a stratum of flying bullets so that in loading, every time I was about to raise my arm to ram down the charge I said to myself, "Here goes a bullet through this arm." And yet, at the same time I noticed the vicious snips with which the grass-blades all about were being cut. How any one escapes in close battle is a mystery; yet the killed and wounded are almost always a small minority.

Strange to say, the companies on the left, which were most exposed held out longest and when, as was inevitable the regiment broke, many of their men and officers refused to run but retired fighting stubbornly. I remember how one captain, a fiery little man tried to hold his men together, how he implored and threatened and swore at them and drew his revolver upon them and at last, when it was no use flung himself down upon the ground and cried like a baby; and how another, a tall German whose company was next to ours held his men to their work nobly until they could be held no longer, and then with slow and moody steps walked up that deadly slope muttering oaths to himself and switching off the grass-blades with his sword. Some veterans who saw him told me afterward that they expected every moment to see him drop.

Our regiment was not the only broken one: the whole front line was apparently gone; the sudden savage charge of twice our number was sweeping everything before it. As the fragments of our company retired up the slope of the field, a few, of whom I happened to be one came to a slightly sunken road, a mere farm track, but in it lay the Sixth Regiment of the old Vermont Brigade. As they saw us they called out, "Rally on us, boys!" and we gladly accepted the invitation. Several weeks before I had been on duty on the picket line: it was the reserve and we were allowed to kindle fires, and all night by the blazing logs I had talked to a young Vermonter, a plain Green Mountain farmer lad, and we had made a soldier's friendship. When I came to the sunken road the first man I saw in

that prone line of men was my camp-fire friend. I called out to him and dropped by his side. Others of our men did likewise and we lengthened out their too short line by about a dozen files.

It was apparently the last desperate hope of the corps. Our division commander, sitting on his horse and watching us is reported to have said to one of his aides, "If that line breaks, we're gone!"

We lay at full length on the ground, silent save for the exhortation of the officers: "Hold your fire, boys!" "Keep quiet, there!" "Down with that rifle!" For we had reached the point where heed of consequences was gone and a cold recklessness had taken possession of us and it was hard to restrain the men.

On came the Confederates, their "rebel yell" now sounding shrill and clear; and they were firing as they came with so deadly an aim that several of our officers who rose up slightly the better to control their men were hit and fell back dead or wounded.

They crossed the ditch where our regiment had been and we could see each separate star and bar upon their red battle-flags and their slouch hats pulled down to shield their eyes from the setting sun, and then their very faces. I remember how I singled out one after another and admired certain big brown beards as they swarmed up the slope straight toward us.

They were almost on us – some of the men said, not ten feet away, but perhaps imagination shortened the distance – when the Vermont colonel, who, as I remember wore a long, black rubber coat over his uniform and looked like a Methodist parson shouted out the command: "Rise! Fire!"

Like spectres looming from the grave, the line of men stood up, and the Song shrieked out in one awful death-laden volley. The field before us was changed as though by some dire magic. A moment before it had been filled with a yelling, charging host; now it was suddenly cleared. As though an October gust had swept across that May evening, away down to the bottom of the field and beyond the ground was strewn with brown, prostrate forms; but they were not leaves, they were dead and wounded men!

The little Vermont regiment had repulsed and shattered a charging Louisiana brigade. We followed up our volley with a counter-charge, our own regiment meanwhile had rallied and joined us, and when we came to the ditch where we had at first been posted dead men lay across and within it, and from their midst living men who had sought refuge from our fire arose, waving their hands in token of surrender: among these the colonel commanding the Confederate brigade.

As he stood up a big, impetuous Scotch-Irishman confronted him with his bayonet, and the savage exclamation:

"Give me yer soord or I'll r – run ye through!"

The colonel was a stately Southern gentleman whose soldierly spirit was unbroken by misfortune.

"No!" he sternly replied, looking disdainfully at the levelled steel. "I yield my sword to no private. Show me a commissioned officer!"

It is hard to say how it might have ended, for Hodge was a dour man; but our lieutenant-colonel was fortunately close at hand. He ordered the soldier away and received the officer's surrender in a manner worthy of them both.

The setting sun was throwing its parting gleams across that awful little field, the Song had sobbed itself into silence, the Sixth Corps was saved, and night's curtain fell upon the last scene in the drama of Chancellorsville.

The Making of a Regiment

The process by which men were made soldiers in our late war was one of the most remarkable things in that phenomenal conflict. Men who had no taste for military life, no desire for martial glory, and none save the most rudimentary military training were enlisted, uniformed, organised into regiments, officered often with those as ignorant of war as themselves, equipped, armed, and sent into the field within a few months, or even a few weeks, after being mustered into service. And these raw regiments were speedily moulded into well-disciplined and effective battalions, fit to be members of a famous army.

All this is history more or less well known, but the way in which the result was accomplished is not so familiar, and perhaps the experience of one who was a member of one of these regiments may be worth telling.

I remember – I was but a boy then – how, at the time of the news from Sumter and the President's first call for troops, the pastor of the village church spoke on a Sunday morning to a breathless congregation and closed with the trumpet call, "Who will go to the war?"

Instantly in the gallery one man stood up. He was a veteran who had served in the regular army in Mexico. There were others, but I mention him because he was typical. Into the earliest formed regiments went the few like the soldier of Mexico who had seen actual warfare, also the pick of the members of the city militia organisations; and into these first regiments went the enthusiasm of the nation's first burst of patriotism. Then, too, the delays of the first year of the war gave opportunity for drill and discipline of the regulation sort, often under officers of West Point training. These oldest regiments were, therefore, the flower of the army, and in a peculiar way the model and foundation of it. But after Gettysburg – indeed, before that memorable battle – they had become terribly reduced in number, and actually formed but a fraction of the mighty host.

The history of the later regiments was different. Enthusiasm, though it did not die, cooled. Something else took its place, something more truly characteristic of the great crisis. I do not know how to give it a name. It was a spirit that entered into the nation, a solemn and compelling impulse that seized upon men whether they would or no. Many attempted to resist, but successful resistance was blasting to peace of mind. The voice of this spirit asked insistently, "Why do you not go to the war?" And it was not easy for an able-bodied man to prove his right to stay at home. It was in obedience to this impulse that men went into regiments formed during the year of 1862. The day for illusions was passing; the grim character of the struggle was becoming too evident. "Going to the war" meant no possibility of holiday excursion, for the stress of the crisis hastened new regiments to the front with small delay; the calls for troops were urgent, and they summoned to serious work. It was by one of these calls that we were mustered, and it was marvellous how quickly ten full companies were enlisted in the county. Local pride had its influence; the county contained one large manufacturing town and several important villages. Town vied with country, and each village with every other, in completing its quota of men. There were other influences. "A draft" was beginning to be talked of, and there were some who said, "I would rather volunteer now than be drafted a few months later." Then, too, for the first time, a bounty was promised. It was small in comparison with the sums afterwards offered, but sufficient to turn the scale with waverers. And yet the chief impulse was that imperious spirit of the hour which had begotten the feeling in every man's breast that until he had offered himself to his country he owed an unpaid debt; and when a regiment was actually in process of organisation in your own neighbourhood, this was brought home with redoubled force; when friends and neighbours to whom perhaps the sacrifice was greater than it possibly could be to yourself came forward, very shame made it difficult to hold back. Men really too old for service forgot a few years of their life and persuaded the mustering officer to wink at the deception. Boys, whose too glaring minority had alone prevented them thus far, yet in whose ardent hearts the spirit of the hour burned the more hotly

by delay, sprang to the opportunity. In our own company there were a few men over forty-five years of age, and a much larger number of whom it would be a stretch of truth to say they were eighteen. It was pretty much the same throughout the ten companies. There were labouring men and mechanics, manufacturers and their employees, storekeepers and clerks, a few farmers, and a few students. There were young men from the best families in the county and some ne'er-do-wells, but the mass of the company and of the regiment was composed of plain, intelligent men, workers in the industries of a busy community. As to nationality, there were a few Germans and a sprinkling of Irish, but the body of the regiment was American of old and solid New England and Dutch stock.

We enlisted on a strictly equal footing, and chose our own company officers. The field officers, the colonel, lieutenant-colonel, and major, were elected by the company officers and appointed by the governor of the State. The non-commissioned officers, the serjeants and corporals, were selected by the captains.

The captain of our own company was a jeweller and an old member of a city militia organisation. Our first lieutenant was a banker's clerk, and our second lieutenant a mechanic who had in some way acquired an excellent knowledge of tactics. These were fair examples of the officers of the regiment. Out of the forty or more of them, ten had served in the State militia; a few of these ten had been with the "three months' men" who were called out at the beginning of the war; scarcely one of them had ever seen a shot fired in anger; the large majority, like the mass of the men, were destitute of any real military knowledge.

As to the colonelcy, the officers had fixed their desires upon a member of one of the old regiments, a highly qualified man; but the State authorities, in their inscrutable wisdom refused to appoint him, and sent us instead a staff officer who, though he had seen some slight service, was ignorant of infantry tactics and without experience in actual command. He was, however, an imposing individual, a fine horseman, with a decidedly military bearing and a self-assurance which temporarily concealed his defects.

Such, then, was the regiment when it was ready to be mustered into the service. You might say, "This is not a regiment; it is a mob," and you would be wrong. The men had gone through no such process of drill as is considered essential to the making of soldiers, yet they were not utterly ignorant even in this matter. It would have been hard at that time to find a young American who did not know something of the rudiments of infantry tactics. The political campaigns immediately preceding the war, with their semi-military organisations and their nightly processions, were a preparation for what followed which has been too little noticed. And when the war began, in every village "Home Guards" or drill classes were formed, and Hardee's and Casey's "Tactics" were well known and carefully studied books. We were all inexperienced, but only a small minority of the thousand men and officers were absolutely ignorant of military drill; moreover the mass of them were intelligent Americans, who learned quickly and easily. When we left the home camp a few weeks after enrollment, we could march deceptively well, and the regiment actually received praise for its fine appearance from spectators whose frequent opportunities had made them critical. Yet we were sadly defective. To keep step, to march by companies, to execute self-consciously a few motions of the manual of arms, is but the alphabet of tactics. The battalion, not the company is the tactical unit, and until a regiment has mastered the battalion drill and has learned skirmish work, it is unfit for modern warfare. In these essential things we were utterly unpractised.

There is also something else more important than drill. With regularly trained troops perfection of drill is simply the index of discipline. We were, in fact, very imperfect in both. Our discipline was certainly lax, yet even this was not wholly lacking. We were not a crowd of enthusiasts. Even at home we had for a year and a half lived in an atmosphere of war; the breath of battle from afar had reached us; we knew something of what it meant to be soldiers and what we were going into. The spirit of the hour enveloped us, and when we were formally mustered in and, with our right hands raised to heaven, took the oath of service, there was no wild cheering; there was instead a feeling of

awe. The soul of the army, the mysterious solidarity of the mighty compelling organisation, seemed to take possession of us; we knew that we were no longer our own. Discipline is already half learned when men are thus made ready for it.

Washington was our first destination. We made the journey in freight cars, and on our arrival went into camp under canvas for the first time. It was shortly after the battle of Antietam, and the city was half camp, half hospital. Everywhere one met the monotonous blue uniforms: officers hurrying hither and thither; wounded convalescents, pale and weary, strolling about; sentries and squads of provost guards; occasionally a brigade of dusty and tattered veterans from the front, marching through the streets; and near the railroad stations, train-loads of wounded men who had been brought in from the overcrowded field hospitals, lying on the floors of box cars, the stench of their undressed hurts filling the air. Everywhere the atmosphere of war emptied of its glamour!

The Capital was the sore heart of the nation, and our glimpse of it was a wholesome lesson. It sobered us; it took away all lingering sense of insubordination, and taught us the relentless power of the mighty machine of which we had become a part, and into which we knew we must be fitted.

In a few days we were sent to Frederick City, and our army life began in earnest. For more than a week we slept without tents, upon the ground, under the open sky. We also took final leave of railroad transportation. We had to learn the use of our feet and the meaning of the march. After a short stay at Frederick, orders came to proceed to Hagerstown. Western Maryland was at that time strongly held by the Union forces, yet it was not a perfectly secure country. It was subject to raids of the enemy's cavalry, and there was a spice of danger in our march. We proceeded by easy stages; though, unseasoned as we were, the ten or twelve miles a day with our heavy loads seemed long enough; and at night when we made our bivouac we took carefully guarded positions and threw out pickets. Once there was a rumour that Stewart's raiders were in the neighbourhood, and our colonel made us a little speech in his bravado style. He told us that we must not load our muskets, "that he greatly preferred the bayonet!" Fortunately, we were unmolested. Everywhere along our march through that beautiful Maryland hill country we saw the marks of war. We crossed the famous South Mountain and a corner of the Antietam battlefield. There were groups of lonely graves by the road-side, and here and there the white tents of lingering field hospitals. On one night we camped near Phil. Kearney's old brigade, one regiment of which had come from our own neighbourhood. Some of us went over to their camp to visit friends whom we had not seen since the beginning of the war. We saw the evening dress parade of that choice regiment. They were fresh from the perils and hardships of the campaign; their ranks were sadly thinned, their clothes worn to rags, many of the men were nearly shoeless; but their rifles and their fighting equipments were in perfect order, and their dress parade was performed with a precision which could scarcely have been surpassed had they been a battalion of regulars in garrison with spotless uniforms and white gloves.

When we reached Hagerstown we found that we were assigned to a brigade of veterans, Yankees from the far North, who had come from their ancestral mountain farms at the first call of their country. They were, in many respects, a contrast to our friends whose dress parade we had witnessed. For those military forms and ceremonies so dear to the heart of the professional soldier they had small regard. They were noted foragers. Their commander, an officer of the regular army who afterwards became a distinguished division chief, said of them with mingled vexation and admiration, "I never saw such men. It is impossible to tire them out. No matter how far or how hard you march them, at night they will be all over the country stealing pigs and chickens." Their five regiments were all from one State, and their *esprit de corps* was very strong. With quaint Yankee drawl they used to boast, "This old brigade has never been broke, and it never shall be." And I think they made good their word to the end. They obeyed their officers with prompt devotion, but only because they knew that this was a necessary part of discipline; they had small reverence for rank or place. One of them once said to me, "When I am on guard, if I see an officer coming I always try to be at the other end of my beat, so that I won't have to salute him." And yet in small essentials these men were very precise soldiers. One

evening one of them came over from his regiment to visit us. The enemy suddenly opened fire from his batteries away beyond the river. It was a common occurrence. There was no special danger; the regiments were not even formed in line; yet this veteran promptly took his leave. "You know," he said, "that when firing begins a man ought to be in his place in his own company." It was so always. With all their independence and contempt for conventionalities, the discipline prevailing in that brigade was really most rigid. They were not fond of reviews, and took no special pains to make a show on such occasions; but to see the splendid line they kept in that deadly charge on the Fredericksburg heights, when one of their small regiments lost over a hundred men in a few moments, was enough to bring tears of admiration from a soldier's eyes; and at Salem Heights, when at evening Stonewall Jackson's men, concentrated in overwhelming force, came down upon us in sudden, savage charge, and the brigade at our right was "smashed like a pitcher thrown against a rock," when every other hope seemed gone, these Yankees stood firm, with unbroken ranks, and saved the Sixth Corps from disaster.

These were the soldiers whose example became our chief teacher in the art of war. Greenhorns as we were, they received us kindly into their fellowship, and, while they criticised freely, they were ever ready to give us full meed of praise for anything we did well.

We were scarcely settled in our brigade camp before orders came which set the whole army in motion. From picturesque Hagerstown we marched toward the Potomac, and encamped for a few days in a grove of magnificent oaks. There was some musical talent of the popular sort in our regiment, and it had crystallised into a glee club whose free concerts about the camp-fires were the delight of the whole brigade and did much to make us pleasantly acquainted with our new friends. One of the men was an expert performer on the banjo, and he had brought his dearly beloved instrument with him. Poor fellow, he was more fit for the concert-room than for a soldier's life, and a few weeks afterward he succumbed to the toil of the march. He "straggled" and was gobbled, banjo and all, by the Confederate cavalry, and we saw him no more.

Reluctantly we left our pleasant camp under the oaks, and a short march brought us to the banks of the Potomac and in view of a pontoon bridge. That river was a Rubicon. On the other side of it lay the debatable land, the region of bloody battle, and the bridge which, like a dark line of fate lay across the water in the glow of twilight, seemed the final decision of our destiny. We had dreamed that we were to be employed in garrison duty to relieve older and more experienced troops. Now we knew that we must take our share, raw as we were, in the toil and peril of the coming campaign. Soldiers never know their destination on the march. Even the officers, unless they be corps or division commanders, are usually as much in the dark as the humblest privates, and the river, with its pontoon bridge was a revelation to our veteran friends as well as to ourselves. We listened to their comments with hushed attention. "Well, here we are once more; here is the river and there are the pontoons, and we are going over into Virginia again. The inhabitants of the land are all rebels, and yet the last time we were over there our generals were mighty tender toward them. No foraging was allowed, and we submitted tamely; we spared the inhabitants. But this time, may the gods do so to us and more also if we spare them!"

There was something of the Cromwellian spirit among these Yankees, and in spite of the provost guard, they made good their threat.

The crossing of that river in the morning marked a new stage in the making of the regiment. We entered upon our first real discipline, and it was that of the march. Our tramp through Maryland, which had seemed so severe, was really child's play. Now we were part of a great campaigning host, a mere unit in the moving mass in which we must perforce keep our place. The discipline of the march may seem very simple, and it is in fact, simpler in some ways than people suppose who have formed their ideas from what they have seen in city parades. The tactics of the march are elementary. The soldier must know how to keep his place in a column of fours; the regiment must be able instantly to form in line. That is about all. On the march there is no attempt at keeping step; there is far

less apparent order than in a political parade. Each man carries his gun as he pleases, only so that he interferes with no one else. Yet, with loose order and apparent freedom there is really severest restraint. The ranks must be kept closed up; to lag, even when you are most weary is a fault; to drop out of your place and "straggle" is a crime. A man is but a cog in the wheels of a remorseless machine, and he must move with it. The march is an art which some otherwise well-drilled troops are slow in acquiring. A regiment of infantry is seldom allowed the road. When an army is moving through a hostile country, the roads are monopolised by the artillery and the supply and ammunition trains; foot soldiers must take to the fields, find a way over ploughed ground or meadow, through fences, through brush, through woods, across bridgeless streams. In spite of obstacles the column must press on keeping its formation intact, and keep closed up. This is no simple matter.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.