With the Swamp Fox

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I clasped the old man's hand, understanding for the first time what a friend he was.

CHAPTER I. MY UNCLE, THE MAJOR.

He who sets himself down to write of his own deeds in order that future generations may know exactly what part he bore in freeing the colonies from the burdens put upon them by a wicked king, must have some other excuse, or reason, than that of self-glorification.

Some such idea as set down above has been in my mind from the moment Percy Sumter—meaning my brother—urged that I make a record of what we did while serving under General Francis Marion, that ardent patriot and true soldier, who was willing to make of himself a cripple rather than indulge in strong drink.

I question if there be in the Carolinas any one who does not know full well the story of that night in Charleston, when, the door being locked upon him in order that he might be forced to drink, General Marion—then only a colonel—leaped from the window, thereby dislocating his ankle, rather than indulge in a carousal which to him was unseemly and ungentlemanly.

This is but a lame beginning to what it is intended I shall tell regarding those days when we two lads, Percy and myself, did, as it has pleased many to say, the work of men in the struggle against foreign rule; yet however crude it may appear to those better versed in the use of the pen, it is the best I can do. My brother and myself went into General Marion's camp before our fourteenth birthday, and since that time have studied the art of warfare instead of letters, which fact is due to the troublous times rather than our own inclination, for my desire ever was to improve my mind until I should be at least on equal terms with those lads who were more favored as to country.

First let me set down that of which we two—meaning Percy and myself—can honestly claim without fear of being called boastful.

Our mother was sister to those noble gentlemen, John, William, Gavin, James and Robert James, who one and all devoted their fortunes and their lives to the cause of the independence of the Carolinas. She married a Sumter, who died while yet we twins were in the cradle, and, therefore, we were come to look upon ourselves as true members of the James family, rather than Sumters, priding ourselves upon that which every true Carolinian is ready to declare, that "he who rightfully bears the name of James is always ready for the foe, the first in attack and the last in retreat."

I am coming to the beginning of my story in a halting, and what may seem a boastful, fashion, yet to my mind there is no other way of telling plainly what Percy and I were so fortunate as to accomplish under General Marion, than that of explaining why it was we two lads, less than fourteen years of age, should have been given such opportunities.

Now I will write particularly of my uncle, the major, in order that it may be further understood how we lads came to be known as scouts in the service of the "Swamp Fox," and while so doing much which is already well-known must be repeated.

When the city of Charleston was captured by the British, thousands of Carolinians who were true to the cause of independence voluntarily made of themselves exiles, despairing of being able to wrest their native colonies from the hands of the king, and willing to assist those in the north whose possibilities seemed bright.

To the men who were left at home, the proclamation of Sir Henry Clinton, offering pardon to the inhabitants and a reinstatement of all their rights, seemed most honest.

When, however, Sir Henry's second decree was issued early in August, in the year 1780, declaring that we who accepted "pardon" must take up arms against those of the northern colonies who were yet holding their own against oppression, the condition of affairs seemed suddenly to have changed, and the gentlemen of the Carolinas asked

themselves how these two proclamations could bear relationship.

Such question could only be answered by those high in authority under the king, and that the matter might be made plain, the people of Williamsburg, in the colony of South Carolina, chose my uncle, Major John James, to represent them in asking for an explanation.

The nearest post was at Georgetown, and the commandant one Captain Ardesoif.

To this officer my uncle presented himself with the question as to what might be meant by the demand that the people of South Carolina "submit themselves to the king," and if, after having done so to the satisfaction of his majesty, they would be allowed to remain at their homes.

The British captain was one who looked upon the colonists generally as slaves who should be whipped into subjection, rather than men who were able and willing to defend their lives, and taking such view of the Carolinians, he made answer much in this fashion:

"His majesty offers you a free pardon, of which you are undeserving, for you all ought to be hanged: but it is only on condition that you take up arms in his cause."

Had this redcoated captain known my uncle better, he might have selected his words with greater wisdom; but, unacquainted with our family, he could have made no greater mistake, and proud am I to set down that which I know to be my uncle's answer:

"Sir, the people whom I am come to represent will scarcely submit to such condition."

Then it was that Captain Ardesoif flew into a passion, giving no heed to the possibility that it might be dangerous to allow his tongue free rein.

"Represent!" he cried in a fury. "You insolent rebel, if you dare speak in such language I will have you hung up at the yard-arm," and the redcoated captain pointed to his ship, which lay in the harbor.

I had never set myself down as a member of the James family if such words had been allowed to pass unnoticed, but those who know my uncle could have told the captain that he was most unwise in attempting to force us into any agreement.

The king's officer was armed, and my uncle, clad in a garb such as is worn by us of Williamsburg, carried no weapons. This fact, however, had no weight with Major James.

Seizing the chair upon which he sat he rushed upon the insolent Britisher, striking him senseless with a single blow, and then making his escape at once, for the king's soldiers were there in force, he mounted his horse and fled from the town.

All possibility that we of Williamsburg would "submit" had vanished, and within four and twenty hours came the enrolment of that body of true gentlemen and noble soldiers who were afterward known, and the memory of whom will live so long as the history of these colonies are told, as "Marion's Brigade."

It was the major, as a matter of course, who took command of these volunteers, and they were divided into four companies, each under a captain.

The first was led by William M'Cottry; Henry Mouzon had command of the second. John of the Lake—another branch of the James family, and an uncle to the major—was captain of the third, while John McCauley stood at the head of the fourth division.

These gentlemen, who had come together within less than four and twenty hours after my uncle's interview with the representative of his majesty at Georgetown were all residents of the district of Williamsburg, and were rendezvoused on the banks of Lynch's Creek nearby where it joins the Great Pedee River within less than two miles of my mother's home.

All this is set down by way of explanation, so that whosoever in the days to come shall read what I am so lamely doing, may understand how it chanced that we two lads played so important a part—for circumstances put it in our way to do good work—in the struggle which finally freed the Carolinas, as well as the other colonies of America, from the burdens which the king put upon them.

Percy and I had seen somewhat of warfare, or at least we believed we had, and watched keenly the movements of this brigade which my uncle commanded, expecting that such deeds of valor would be performed by him and his soldiers as must give new impetus to the Cause throughout all the colonies.

Then, to our great surprise, we learned that General Marion was appointed chief over the forces raised in the Williamsburg district, and our hearts were filled with disappointment because it appeared to us that thereby had Major James lost the opportunity to show himself the valiant and skillful officer we believed him to be.

As a matter of course we had heard much regarding this soldier who leaped out of a window at the expense of breaking his bones, rather than join a party of gentlemen in their drinking, and were burning with curiosity, which as I have said, was mixed with deep disappointment, to know what kind of an appearance he might present.

The men of the command were by no means as captious regarding him as we two nephews of the man whom we believed to be the rightful commander.

Those Carolinians who took part in the defense of Charleston knew him to be a brave colonel, and expected much of him as a general; but we lads were more than disappointed in the appearance of the soldier who had already made for himself a worthy name.

We saw a small, swarthy gentleman, walking with a decided limp, wearing a round-bodied, crimson jacket, and, perched upon his head was a leathern cap ornamented with

a silver crescent on which were inscribed the words "liberty or death."

While we were not disposed to compare the king's soldiers with our own brave men to the disparagement of the latter, we had seen officers from many countries, and had rather more than a vague idea of what a uniform should be. Therefore this grotesque costume—for I can call it by no other name—impressed us unfavorably, although in a very few days we came to learn better than ever before that something more than clothes are needed to make the man.

When General Marion arrived at Lynch's Creek on the 12th of August, the men of Williamsburg had a military organization numbering, perhaps, four hundred, and not a man that could boast of a complete equipment.

Our Carolinians were armed with whatsoever weapons they owned, some carrying shot-guns and others muskets, while M'Cottry's company were provided with small-bore rifles. Each man had, perhaps, his horn filled with powder; but no more than that, and, as I have heard my uncle say time and time again, when the brigade first went into camp there was not of ammunition sufficient to sustain an engagement lasting half an hour.

The variety of missiles was as great as that of weapons. A few had muskets or rifle balls which they themselves had molded; others carried buck-shot, and some were provided only with bird-shot.

As for swords, bayonets and pikes, we had none, and the first order which General Marion issued after arriving at Lynch's Creek, caused me to have a higher opinion of him than I had at first believed would be possible.

Word was given that the force disperse in squads of from five to a dozen men, and set about sacking the saw mills in the immediate vicinity. Nothing was to be taken away from them save the saws, and these it was proposed should be beaten by the blacksmiths of the district into sabres.

Now in such work as this two lads like Percy and myself could do as much as men, and, without asking the privilege of volunteering, we set out, forming an "independent command of two," as Percy put it, bound for a certain mill owned by one Pingree, who had announced again and again that a Carolinian who would set himself in defiance against the king deserved nothing better than hanging.

It was no brave adventure which we started upon, and yet it led to our being brought into direct, and I might almost say close, contact with General Marion himself.

There was little need that we two lads should ask permission from our mother to join in the work of saw gathering, for the major was at the head of the family in good truth, and whatsoever he might do, was, in the opinion of even the most distant relatives, worthy of being copied.

It was only necessary Percy and I should announce that we counted on aiding the major so far as might be possible, and our mother at once saw that we were provided with such amount of provisions as would serve to keep hunger at bay during at least two days.

Perhaps my uncle might have objected to the plan had he been informed of it; but such information we were not minded to give lest the venture should be a failure, and we become a butt for his mirth.

Therefore it was we set out secretly, so to speak, armed with the rifles which during no less than half a dozen years had served us in all the turkey-hunts and deer-stalking parties we were allowed to join.

Because this venture of ours was not important, save in what it led up to, there is no reason why I should use many words in the telling of it. Suffice it to say that after a tramp of ten miles or more, when we had crossed the Pedee River at Port's Ferry and were at Pingree's Mills, we learned, greatly to our surprise and considerably to our fear, that we should not be allowed to dismantle the building.

There we were met by a lad of our acquaintance whose home was in Kingstree. Samuel Lee was the name of this fellow, with whom we had had little intercourse because of his associating much with the king's soldiers; there had never been any bad blood between us, but we held aloof from him, and now I was less inclined than ever to give him my confidence.

He was curious to know what brought us so far from home, and on our part we wondered what had led him out of the district.

Neither Percy nor I had any particular reason to fear Sam Lee; yet instinctively we closed our mouths on his approach, which was at the very moment when we were about to wrench the saws from the fastenings, and awaited his speech.

"What are you two hunting?" he asked with an unwarranted assumption of familiarity which Percy at once resented by closing his mouth closely, while I, little dreaming what information it was possible for him to give, replied in a tone intended to repel his advances:

"Any game which comes our way is not unwelcome."

"Are you expecting to find fur or feather in Pingree's Mill?"

I was tempted to reply roughly; but without knowing why it should be done, I put a curb upon my tongue and spoke him fairly, even against my inclination.

"When one has traveled far under such a blazing sun as shines to-day, any shelter from the heat is grateful."

"And may at the same time be dangerous for some lads," he said in a tone which caused me to believe it was within his power to give some information of value to us.

"Why should it be dangerous for some, and not for others?" I asked.

"Because all who live in the Williamsburg district do not boast of their relationship to the James family, great though it may be."

Now was I certain he had it in his mind to do us a mischief, and was capable of carrying it out, else the cowardly lad who called himself a Loyalist would never have spoken so boldly.

There was a similar thought in Percy's mind, as I understood from the meaning look he gave me, and then I was resolved to know all Sam Lee could tell.

By way of provoking him to further speech I said boastingly:

"If you know of another family hereabout who have greater reason to be proud of its members, than ours, I would like much to hear the name."

"Those who are wrapped up in their own conceit fail oftentimes of seeing the good which is in others, and I have heard it said that not one of the James tribe would admit that even the king was higher in position than he."

"You might have heard it said with equal truth that not a James, or a true Carolinian would admit that such a king as now claims the right to rule over us, was even our equal." Percy replied hotly, and this seditious remark had the effect which I was hoping to bring about.

It stirred Sam Lee to anger, and he cried menacingly, but taking good care meanwhile to move off at a safe distance.

"Before many days you will learn that the James family cannot even take care of themselves!"

"But who shall teach us that lesson?" Percy asked with a sneer.

"No less a man than Major Gainey himself."

"And how can he, who is now in Charleston, teach us so odd and sudden a lesson?"

"The major is at Britton's Neck!" Sam cried triumphantly. "In command of a body of Loyalists so large that the people of Williamsburg will soon be on their knees begging protection from the king's troops."

"He will need have more Tories at his back to do that, than have ever been found in the Carolinas," Percy cried,

now almost boiling with rage.

"It may be that you Sumter lads, who hang to the skirts of Major James because of the great deeds he claims to be able to perform, have yet much to learn regarding the Loyalists of the Carolinas! What say you to two thousand well-armed and well-drilled men?"

"Two thousand?" Percy repeated with a laugh of scorn. "You know full well, Sam Lee, that such a number of Tories cannot be gathered in these colonies."

"There is at this moment, ready to march upon your wonderful General Marion, near to that number of men, and before a week has passed every James around Williamsburg will be in custody of the king's forces."

"If all you say be true, and I doubt seven-eighths of it, why are you so far afield from those of your kidney? After all that has taken place in this colony, a Tory would do well to have a care over his steps lest he blunder into evil," and now it was that I began to lose control over my temper.

"It is you who are blundering, Bob Sumter, for I have but to raise my voice and an hundred soldiers will answer me."

Percy laughed derisively; but I am willing to confess that there was something very like timorousness in my heart as the Tory lad spoke, for I knew full well he had not dared say so much unless friends were close at hand.

Now I felt positive there were no such number of Tories under Major Gainey as Sam Lee had said, yet was I equally certain there must be a strong gathering in the neighborhood, and he would have been a dull lad indeed who could not realize how important it was that my uncle, the major, have immediate information regarding the assembly.

Once this fact had gained lodgment in my mind I was burning with anxiety to retrace my steps.

There was no longer any desire in us to bring back a goodly store of saws that our neighbors might praise us for having been industrious.