

A TORN STAMP.

BY CAPTAIN KENNETH GILMER.

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When the Army of the Potomac started on the Wilderness campaign in the spring of 1864, there was a hasty rally of scattered commands, and men of all ranks and stations who were on furloughs, detached service and the like turned from their temporary occupations or pastimes, as do border settlers in time of Indian alarm, and rushed to the field of danger. I reached the Wilderness battleground after an air line run to Washington and a forced march across Virginia, and that, too, without an ounce of personal baggage, without money, with nothing but a soldier's regulation equipments and a scribbler's inevitable portfolio. I was a veteran campaigner, and after that fight the myriad dead whose dumb, cold forms would never again utter love messages reminded me that the dear ones left behind me would anxiously await tidings by every northern mail. A volunteer soon learned that patriot fire must be fed by dear home ties; that in order to fight well the soldier must love well, and so mother and sister and cousin and sweetheart must share the warrior's thought and affection. I wrote the usual home letters and hastily put on stamps, letting the other remain so that I might use every second of time before the bag would close. When the call sounded and the mail courier was gathering his burden, I added "just another word," closed it and reached for a stamp, but found nothing but a fragment of a 3-cent issue. "Has any one a spare stamp?" I called out. The answer from all over camp by mocking laughs and catcalls told me that I had echoed a query already ancient.

In my absorption I had been oblivious of the stamp famine raging around me. The agents of the friendly commissions who sometimes forward army letters were not at hand, so I scribbled across the edge of the envelope, "A soldier's battlefield letter to his sweetheart; no stamp," and tossed it into the mail bag, returning the torn stamp to my portfolio quite carelessly. For a fact the kindly countenance of the Father of His Country seemed to smile on me from that stamp as I glanced at it. I recalled some of the stories of the young British Lieutenant and his amatory ardor until I fancied he was my friend whispering to me each time that I thought about my wandering missive. "It is all right, my boy; that Wilderness letter is going to Lucy," the whisper would say. We went

into battle after battle, and our marching and fighting postponed all letter writing. We shouldered our way to Richmond, and I was one of the 10,000 who crawled away from Cold Harbor, maimed and bleeding, with a stinging hurt to carry for life. We were soon en route to Washington, and the river and railway conveyances were weighted with crushed and groaning humanity.

About three days after I left the field I received from the sanitary people two Boston crackers and a gill of milk punch. When I saw Washington at the end of a week, I was burning and thirsting and longing madly for something to cool the fever of lip and head and coursing veins. All about the wharfs where our steamer put in there were hucksters of every sort of repulsive trash—pies, black cakes, fat-soaked doughnuts—just the sights to derange still more the famished stomach and unfit it for the coarse hospital fare which was now to follow. When we reached the new diet, it was rough, raw and tasteless and in every way unsuited to the palates of suffering men. Finally, within two or three days, we were put on board box freight cars on bare floors and baulked, with much jolting and spasmodic shakings, to Baltimore.

The arrival of a new detachment of men from the front attracted the basket peddlers of the streets, and they quickly surrounded the parade ground, crying out their stock with a glibness that was ex-



"HAS ANY ONE A SPARE STAMP?"

remely tantalizing. "Nice fresh oranges, ten for a quarter!" A stoical warrior without a cent could resist that, but the musical throat of one young girl in the crowd had a decided charm. There was a push to the front by all who were able to see

crutches, although there was not a dime in the entire party.

Some one called out, "Do you take stamps?" Of course the answer was "Yes" as soon as the money panic was known to the hawkers. Some of the liveliest of the crippled ones then hustled into the barrack, and one by one they returned and counted out their last fiscal symbols and sat down on the grass to enjoy their fruit. Those who could not join certainly felt no better for looking on. Among the latter was a famishing lad whose wits had been turned by his suffering, and when he saw some of the men eating oranges he reached out and seized one from a basket and began to devour it, and that without question or bargain or pay. The girl with the musical throat looked startled at the bold act, but soon smiled and continued her cry, "Nice fresh oranges!" But the girl was only a helper of the real owner, and now a swarthy, hard looking Hun stepped forward and held his hand out to get the proceeds of the sales. He counted the money and then the oranges in the hands of the men, and as he saw there was a difference he demanded something from the girl in a jargon we could not interpret. The girl began to weep, and just then the famished boy, unconscious of everything but his desperate craving for food, reached for another orange. He secured one, but the old Hun grabbed the basket, gave the girl a rough shaking, and then, after placing his goods beyond reach of the soldiers, returned and attacked the boy. The lad was too weak to stand, but he clung to his prize, and the brutal hawk-er wrung the slender wrists to make him let go.

There were some strong, cool men there who could not endure this sight, and before I could see just how the melee opened the soldiers had raided the whole pack of gypsy peddlers and gathered up every scrap of edibles, overturning the baskets and beating off the owners, some of whom fought like beasts. I could never see any glory in the black eyes and bruises of a common brawl, no matter what the occasion, and was only a sad spectator here. At the beginning of all this business I had taken a parcel of keepsakes from my pocket, and, just to make sure for the twentieth time that I had no current values about me, ran over the pile carefully. The torn stamp was in the lot and caught my attention, and, with a flood of memories, it bore my thought away from the present scene. First, Lucy's letter and what was she thinking now of me. There were two heads bending over it now, for a wounded comrade stood so close that he could look into my hand and was studying me as intently as I studied the stamp. What his thoughts were I never knew, but they were equally distracting with mine, for we two had not yielded to the passionate drift of the crowd, and when these broke out upon peddlers we alone were cool. We vainly begged them to stop, but their slogan was unanswerable in words:

"Down with the foreigners! They have no right here! We don't fight just to keep up the country for them!"

The men were mad, and the rage must work itself out. More than one badly wounded man had his hurt opened afresh in the rough and tumble encounter, and all of them retired shamefaced from their ignoble triumph.

I said to my strange mate as I held out the torn stamp, "Had this been good I would have paid for the boy's orange and prevented this trouble." Tears were in his eyes, and I saw that he was a man of sensibilities. He turned away, and the figures on his cap, which I had not noticed before, gleamed in the sunshine, and at once branded themselves upon my vision—"142nd Vols."

I left the scene with my companion, and, the quicker to drop the unpleasant affair from mind, proposed that we two exchange one of our crutches. Such things are relics, and mine had come from Washington's old home, White House, Va., and my acquaintance's from Winchester in the valley. We tried them, and were both suited, but he had carved his very neatly with several designs and with his full name in old English—"Joseph Pennington." This, too, was transferred mystically to a place in my memory and stood out boldly beside those characters I had seen on his cap, so that the legend now fixed there was, "Joseph Pennington, 142nd Vols." That evening my furlough reached me, and I was on route for my home in the Empire State before midnight.

My first act upon reaching an abiding place was to write to Lucy in New England, and then I began to count the hours until time for reply. Days went by and ran into weeks, yet none came. A second letter was written to explain the Wilderness case and my inability to dispatch another until I reached home. All this was to no effect, and finally gossip reached me in a roundabout way that Lucy had taken up with a dashing young fellow, an adventurer who had sent a substitute to battle to fight in his stead. The sequel to this gossip came just before I left home again for the front. This was a package of letters returned—my glowing camp letters of 1861-2. And the first to meet my sight, intentionally so, was the Wilderness letter, with a heavy line traced about my ingenious and ingenious frank, thus:

A SOLDIER'S BATTLEFIELD LETTER TO HIS SWEETHEART.

Lucy aimed to be reckoned in the New England circle of Vere de Vere, and a romantic impulse born on the treacherous field of death found no vulnerable place in her armor of propriety. I was confused, to state it mildly, almost desperate, but when the field of war was reached again devotion to the fighting offered a good antidote, and the exciting work which followed helped to turn that affection most speedily from an object so unworthy.

In this great campaign came the climax of interest concerning this stamp. It had now come to be prized with something of that personal veneration we give to charms. A week before Richmond and Petersburg fell into the Union hands I was aroused from a sleep on the outpost bivouac in front of the latter city by a rough shaking and felt myself hurried off by force toward Lee's lines. Our men had been surprised. It was very dark, and the Confederates found such heavy fighting ahead of them when our forces received the alarm that they had to disregard the handful of prisoners taken, and so before daylight I found opportunity to steal away from the presence of the troops. Some greenbacks concealed on me purchased seclusion for the time and also a good suit of Confederate clothing. An old negro in a hut between the forts and the city helped me to these, and I found him a shrewd adviser besides. He told me to go into the interior of Dixie. He said that all about the army lines orders were strict and a close watch was



"HAD THIS BEEN GOOD I WOULD HAVE PAID FOR THE BOY'S ORANGE."

kept, but away from the lines men came and went pretty much at pleasure. One circumstance favored me and controlled all my subsequent experiences. Although I was an old campaigner, I was a beardless boy, with fair skin, and actually appeared like a schoolboy rather than a soldier in the field. Weather bronze and battle grime had not taken hold in my case, and this old man raised my hopes many degrees when he declared contemptuously at our leave taking, "Nobody gwine to bother wiv sich baby trash like yo'."

In ten days I made the circuit of the whole army of Lee and reached well known ground on the Rappahannock, near Fredericksburg. I found that Federal cavalry was posted on the north bank opposite, and concluded to join it at once and trust for a welcome despite my suit of gray. I spied out my route in the morning, and then went to sleep away the day in an isolated barn. At dusk that day I was determined to cross the stream to the cavalry camp. But during the day, while I slept, the scouts of the camp raided the whole region along that bank of the river, and I was made prisoner to my own men. Everything was against me, and my treatment was rough, for the story I told was declared a lie. "We have too much of that," said the leader. It appeared that some of the river patrol had been fondly murdered shortly before by treacherous citizens or guerrillas, and the comrades of the victims were bent on speedy revenge. They had secured nine other stragglers like myself, some in civilian and some in Confederate army dress. These unfortunate were hidden in a wooded vale beyond reach of discovery and rescue, and here they were pleading for a chance of life by military trial under the authorities at Washington. To their petitions I now added mine. But the majority of the guard advocated summary measures. My situation was a trying one. There was not a scrap of documentary evidence about me for identification. When taken by the enemy, I wore an overcoat, in the pocket of which always rested my Bible. The fly leaf was missing, and hence bore no record. I kept it wrapped in a gum cover to preserve it, and between its leaves, incased in a folded strip of blue tissue, was the torn postage stamp, the contrivance serving as a place mark and a memento as well. In the transformation made at the time of capture and escape I had parted with all else that belonged to me as a Union soldier, even my United States underclothing, shoes and stockings. The patrol which now had us in charge was an out-

post guard for a large camp composed of all arms which lay back on Stafford hills. We were to die the death of outlawed and down, and on this day of doom I thought



"OH, THIS FELLOW MAY BE ONLY A BIRD MORE RECENT."

to see an infantryman from the main camp coming to the cavalry bivouac with dispatches. His cap bore the character "142nd—Vols."

There was a rift in the cloud at once. Fortunately two of our guard were strong-willed and humane and ready to favor us with kindly offices. They led us and took our last messages for friends and directions for our identification, and from them I learned that the One Hundred and Forty-second regiment was all in the camp five miles distant. I asked to be conducted there, but the acquaintance which I claimed was so slight that the commander snarled and declared it was simply another trick to gain time. Our kind advocates then took it up and offered to investigate the case, and soon Joseph Pennington was brought to our prison glen. Pennington, too, shook his head. When he last saw me the pallor caused by pain and the blight of wound and fever were upon me. My counting that affair with the hucksters in Baltimore shook him a little, but one of the guard who was zealous for our destruction broke the force of its influence most skillfully. He said: "Oh, this fellow may be only a Baltimore scoundrel who was hanging around that time. Come to think, I have seen him sneaking around the depots and wharfs in Baltimore and Alexandria, spying out the movements of our troops." Settled prejudices are hard to uproot. Pennington quit the scene, and we were told to get ready. Some prayed, some cried. I paced the ground like a caged tiger. There was not a guilty one in the party—that is, guilty of the crime charged or anything like it, although there were some night riders in the crowd—some of Mosby's rangers. I could see "innocent" written upon every pallid countenance, and emotions stirred by my own grief and my sympathy for my fellows, as I thought of this misdeed and cruel execution, moved me beyond control. I burst into a tornado of vehement appeals aimed at any who would listen. Some ears were open. I pleaded against the shedding of innocent blood, pictured the calamity to be visited on so many homes, foretold the harrowing thoughts to arise some day in the minds of our beloved friends when they should learn the story of our vain and shameful deaths, and at last came to the point of fastening upon the would-be perpetrators a lifelong remorse.

My eloquence—for who could not be fired with logic at such a crisis?—commanded attention and several of the guard withdrew from the sound of it. The leader stood near gloomy and cold. All this time my Bible in its close wrapper had remained in my hand, pressed instinctively to my heart, and as a last argument I turned to it to try if I could not move those obdurate hearts by reading from God's own word. As I turned the covers nervously the blue inclosures fell out, and a pregnant thought—"that stamp and Pennington"—rushed to my mind. "Here is proof!" I cried. "Let me see Joseph Pennington again!" The hour was up, but a respite was allowed and Pennington came sullenly back. My game was desperate. I showed him that fragment stamp and told the whole story without a break. He scanned me, still skeptical, but I had put in a wedge. Doubt had arisen. After a hasty consultation the execution was deferred until daylight, and my own was then to be subject to approval of a council from the main camp. Of course I was a hero among the doomed men. About midnight word came that Lee had surrendered his army. The startling tidings instantly disarmed the passionate prejudices of the freetrade strife. The stern judgments and fatal verdicts of martial courts were off forever, and every man of us went free, filled with gratitude words failed to express.

The little faded fragment of a stamp now mounted on blue tissue, and hangs over my crib. I prize it as the choicest of my collection of relics of the war.