

The Day The Yankees Came To Blair: 21 February 1865

An Account of the Yankees Pillaging in the Buckland Section*

By Mrs. Sarah Lyles Feaster

My father was an ardent States Rights advocate, and from him I inherit my reverence for my Revolutionary ancestors and glory in the name of Rebel, whether attached to the patriots of 1776 or 1860, against King George, III, or Northern Abolitionists who brought the "Nation's ward" from Africa for their own profit but, finding that they did not thrive in the rigorous climate of New England, forced them upon the South -- and then began to be shocked at the sin of slavery.

"Year after year they set up wailing lamentations about Southern wrongdoing, bringing all the power of prayer, of press and pulpit to arouse a fierce fanaticism, until finally their efforts culminated in one of the bloodiest wars of all time, followed by insults and injuries heaped upon the vanquished that are without a parallel in modern times."

In resistance to many constitutional violations, South Carolina led the band; and a history of all that befell her people in the succeeding years would fill many volumes.

The enthusiasm that greeted secession of the State beggars description. A sister had reared a Lone Star flag in front of the house, and it was interesting, indeed, to watch the people passing by saluting it; and as an index of the spirit that animated our youthful hearts, here is a copy of a little poem that its erection inspired, composed by my father, William S. Lyles, Esquire:

The Lone Star is up, now come, brothers, come,
And rally around this bright emblem of home;
It floats on the breeze, base tyrants defying;
Then, brothers, stand by, and keep it still flying.

Long, long have we borne with insult and wrongs,
The hate of the traitor, the threat of the strong;
But the star of redemption has risen at last;
Then, brothers, this banner come nail to the mast.

* Extracted from Volume Four of "Recollections and Reminiscences" published by S.C. Division, United Daughters of the Confederacy.

And then, let it float, aye, wave in defiance
Of Lincoln and Douglas, the hated alliance
Who have threatened in wrath the South to subdue;
Then, rally as one and swear to be true.

Look, look to the flag that now beckons you on,
To fields where freedom is again to be one;
Then rally and perish, if even you must,
Ere one of its folds to be trailed in the dust.

Then look to the flag, so proud and so free,
That waves o'er our homes and mountains to see;
And swear in your hearts to meet Death's embrace
Ere tyrants shall ever that Lone Star efface.

Alas! We did not know through what suffering that emblem was to lead, did not realize that many of our relatives and friends were to shed their life's blood in its defense. *Animis, opibusque parati* was not a vain boast with the sons of Carolina. When the tocsin of war sounded and a call was made for the defenders of her sacred soil, they came flocking to her standard, as though moved by one impulse. Lawyers, physicians, merchants, farmers, artisans -- all responded to that call and soon were on their way to Charleston. How that task was fulfilled is well known. How Fort Sumter was besieged and captured under the peerless Beauregard will live in "song and story."

Then, "our boys" were sent to assist in driving the invader from the soil of old Virginia, the Mother of so many of the Presidents of the United States, who was now seeking her destruction and that of her sister States of the South.

Until the spring of 1865, life in the up-country had been comparatively peaceful, saved for the absence of loved ones at the front and the deprivation of the luxuries of life. We did not realize the horrors of grim-visaged war. But Sherman's invasion of the State tore the veil from our eyes. Oh, that I possessed a ready pen, that I might portray the scenes of horror that are indelibly impressed upon my brain as I recall those dark days.

For days before the advent of General Kilpatrick* and his bummers in our neighborhood, we were being warned by the lurid light of burning houses, and by the fleeing of refugees before the vandals, of the terrible ordeal in store for us. We, the Daughters of the Revolutionary Sires, had espoused the Southern cause with all our hearts, and now we would pay the penalty of our loyalty.

The morning of February 21st, 1865, dawned gloomily. The sunbeams vainly strove to pierce the murky atmosphere. A fearful dread was on each heart and confusion reigned supreme. The Yankees had visited my grandfather's the night before, taking off

* Hugh Judson Kilpatrick: West Point graduate. Brigadier General in February 1865 and promoted to Major General in March 1865. His troops called him "Kil-Horse" or "Horse-Killer" for his hard use of his cavalry horses. His biographer wrote: "A notorious Don Juan- given to fictitious descriptions of his own feats, vain, and careless of the truth." Kilpatrick departed Winnsboro in a stolen carriage with Marie Boozer.

his saddle horse, and said they would return in the morning. I, with two sisters, was at a cousin's home, vainly thinking it was in a more retired place than our own and might not be visited by so many of the enemy. We went to breakfast with heavy hearts and had scarcely taken our seats when the dread cry was heard, "The Yankees are coming, The Yankees are Coming!"

With a whispered prayer for God's protection, we hurried back to the sitting room, and in a few minutes more the house resounded with the shouts of rude soldiers as they galloped up the avenue, surrounded the house, dismounted rushed through every door, their guns striking on the floor with discordant sounds, cursing and jeering as they came. Their seating themselves at the table and devouring the nicely prepared breakfast, and each man pocketing the silverware as he arose, are pictures indelibly stamped upon memory's tablet. While at the table, one of the intruders called out, "Some of you Southern girls come and pour coffee for us," to which the lady of the house replied, "There are servants. Let them wait on you."

The scenes that followed from "early morn until dewy eve," I am unable to portray justly and can compare them to naught but some of those described in *Dante's Inferno*, so unlike civilized things, seeing these creatures turned loose to prey upon the women and children and old men of the South.

Every drawer, trunk, and cupboard was ransacked. One room in which refugee friends had trunks stored was knee deep in clothing dragged from these receptacles. After taking whatever struck their fancy, blankets and pillow cases were stripped from the beds - the first for saddle cloths, the ladder to be filled with supplies from the pantry. This was repeated by each successive crowd until but little was left to appropriate.

A friend wrote me: "It would hardly be believed that civilized men committed some of the outrages done - mixing garden seed, castor oil and other medicines in a mass so they could not be used, poring barrels of sorghum syrup into wells, shooting down stock that could not be conveniently driven off, stealing ladies' clothing, crepe shawls, silk dresses and other articles for which they had no use, taking off silver plates, watches and jewelry and in one instance taking a gold dollar from a little sick child.

They seemed to think our stock of valuables inexhaustible, for the cry from each successive crowd was, "Where is your silver and gold?" even attempting to take the rings and the brooches from the person. A dear friend from Florida wore a ring, a gift of a dear mother, which caught the eye of one of the soldiers, and he demanded it. Upon her refusal, he advanced to take it forcibly, when she threw it off her hand and dashed it to the other side of the room. He picked it up, exultantly saying, "This is my trophy of a Southern girl!"

"Where are your husbands and brothers?" was a frequent inquiry with them; and the reply, "In Lee's army, where all true Southern men should be," seemed to create no surprise. One impudent fellow retorted, "Yes, if it were not for you women, the war would have ended long ago."

My cousin's husband, Captain William Boykin Lyles, had fallen at Seven Pines while gallantly leading his company in a charge, and his friends had sent his sword and uniform home to her. These cherished relics had been hidden, but a servant betrayed them, and one of the raiders took them down and came into the house to taunt the stricken hearts with the sight - and vain was the request to have them returned.

My grandfather, Major Thomas Lyles, 78 years of age, was lying in bed with a broken hip. One of the brutal soldiers, perhaps thinking he was feigning disability, approached with a torch, which he put under the bed, demanding silver and gold as ransom or they would burn him alive. To this the old hero replied, "I haven't many years to live anyway, so burn and be damned." The soldier, surprised at his fearlessness, exclaimed, "You are the bravest man I have ever seen in South Carolina," and ordered one of the negroes to remove the torch.

Fearing we might be burned down, each one had put on several suits of clothing, so that in case of so dire an event we might better be protected from the cold. We must have presented a ridiculous appearance to our foes, seated in the room with hats and cloaks on (they were but recently from the famous Bee Store and were duly prized) as if about to start on a journey. "Where are you going, and why have you bonnets and cloaks on?" Our replies, "Nowhere," and "To preserve them from Yankees," seemed quite amusing to them.

If we appealed to officers for protection, the inevitable reply was, "These men do not belong to my company and would not obey an order from us." I suppose they separated purposely, that they might rob and destroy without restraint.

In all the hundreds who visited the house, only one man, a lieutenant from Troy, New York (I am sorry I cannot recall his name), seemed to possess the instincts of a gentleman. He came to the sitting room door and said, "Ladies, I see your trunks have been opened. If there is anything you wish to secure, come now and I will protect you," at the same time drawing his sword from the scabbard and ordering the plunderers to desist. At my cousin's request, he remained with us as a protector for several hours and seemed to really deprecate the manner in which the soldiers were behaving. He said he was fighting for the Union, and not for the plunder, etc.

The negroes traveled about a good deal and took pleasure in circulating the wildest rumors about the Yankees' doing at the neighboring places. A little sister, whose devotion to her mother was marvelous, was made almost frantic by the report that she had been shut up in the house and a torch applied, because she would not reveal the hiding place of her valuables. Her nervous system never recovered from the shock, and five weeks later her pure spirit sought a more peaceful clime. A young friend also was never well after that terrible raid and a few months later died of Typhoid Fever induced by the excitement. They were as surely victims of the war as if slain in battle.

The night before the Yankees came, a gallant, foot-sore Confederate sought Mother's hospitality, which she gladly extended, provided he was not afraid of capture. He was willing to risk it, as he had walked twenty-five miles that day and was almost broken down. He was on his way to rejoin his command in North Carolina and, owing to railroads being torn up, had to travel much on foot. Though a stranger, he won our kindest sympathy by his gentle bearing, and we did all in our power to render him comfortable and give him the needed rest. Daddy Jack, an old servant, volunteered to stand guard and give warning if he heard the Yankees coming.

Our young friend escaped capture only to become a sacrifice upon our country's altar, for he was slain in one of the engagements near Smithdeal, South Carolina.

“Sleep sweetly in your humble grave,
Sleep, martyr of the fallen cause.”

General Kilpatrick and staff rode up to my mother's door and demanded a map of South Carolina. Upon a servant's producing it, one of his aides dismounted and coolly cut out the counties of Fairfield, Chester, and Lancaster, saying that was all he wanted. A short while thereafter, fire was set to the dwelling, barns, stables, and gin house. All were consumed, with their contents, except the dwelling which was extinguished by a little sister.

My aunt and her daughters were entertaining at dinner four Confederate soldiers who were trying to reach their commands in North Carolina and Virginia, when the cry arose, “The Yankees are coming!” Of course, there was a rush made by the Confederates to the woods to escape capture. They were spied by the Yankees and chased through the yard and fired upon. One was wounded slightly and captured, and the rest made good their escape. One had rushed off minus his knapsack which was besieged by one of the young girls, Rebecca Lyles. Without thinking of the danger she would be exposed to from the flying shot, she picked it up and ran after them, throwing it close enough to the owner for him to catch it as he fled.

After plundering here, they resorted to the torch to still further distress the helpless ladies and children, a fire being placed in one of the daughter's trunks that had been packed preparatory to sending her away to boarding school. One of the raiders must have possessed a spark of humanity, as he responded to my aunt's request, “Put out the fire,” before it had done a great deal of damage.

Another aunt, who possessed a lovely voice, saved her piano from destruction by singing at their request, thus proving that “Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.”

A handsome piano stood in the parlor of a cousin's house that had been abandoned, and as the soldiers were about to chop it to pieces, a negro man begged for it. They gave it to him on condition of his taking it unaided, which feat he accomplished, only to have it chopped to pieces by the next crowd.

An aunt told me of her mother, a native of New Haven and one of the most intelligent and pious persons I ever knew, who became so indignant at their ruthless behavior that she caught a boy who was pillaging in her room by the arm and called an officer to take charge of the little scamp. He, awed by her manner, complied with her request.

Sugar was a rarity in those days, and my cousin, knowing the Yankees would appropriate it, had hidden a can of it in a mass of shrubbery in the yard. But it was found and carried off, except a few pounds which two little boys were discovered feasting upon after they left.

As a general thing, the negroes behaved well, though they were very much excited and seemed to be afraid, also. Only a few seemed to be hail fellow with them. They had not been corrupted by contact with the radical horde that preyed like harpies upon the State. After the war, they naturally looked upon us as friends and protectors.

A day and a night Kilpatrick and his bummers stayed in our neighborhoods, filled with neat homes, presenting an appearance of refinement and comfort, they reduced it to a

scene of desolation, marked by smoking ruins, the chimneys of which stood for years like grim sentinels to remind us of that awful time.

In my immediate neighborhood, several large residences, a score of cotton gins and one of the best flour mills in the up country were burned. Hundreds of horses were carried off. In some instances, broken-down stock was left in their stead. Nearly all the provisions were destroyed or carried off. What a condition for defenseless women and children to be left in, many of them homeless and destitute of the necessities of life.

How we managed to live on the scraps is a mystery, but "He who feedeth the raven" helped us. I scarcely think the Goths and Vandals could have acted more barbarously; and though nearly forty-five years have elapsed since Kilpatrick's raid, I cannot recall it without a shudder.

The surrender of General Lee's army was a sad blow, for then we realized that "a nation's hopes were dead." We had enshrined the Cause in our hearts and had the faith that right must win, and looked forward to the day when victory would crown our banner to make amends for all - but God ordered it otherwise. To His we will bow, and cherish our glorious memories yet more sacredly, and tell to our children the history of their brave and noble kindred whose patriotism surrounds them as sweet and holy incense rising from our country's altar, on which they were offered as noble sacrifices.

"On fame's eternal camping ground,
Their silent tents are spread,
And glory guards the solemn round
The bivouac of the dead."

Source: The Catherine Ladd Chapter, United Daughters of the Confederacy, Woodward, South Carolina, 1919-1920.