

Half Hours Off Duty.

A STORY OF THE WAR OF 1812.

By James Hannay.—From The Empire.

Chapter I.

IT was Christmas Day, seventy-six years ago, and the pretty village of Newark, the first capital of Upper Canada, was enjoying its great winter holiday. There was not one of its one hundred and fifty houses that did not present some token of the festive season, when "peace on earth and good-will towards men" are the pleasures which give colour to the time. Almost every house had its principal room decorated with evergreens, and in many of them goodly Christmas trees stood laden with gifts. The day was an ideal one for a Canadian winter, with a bright sun and a clear sky; just snow enough to make good travelling, and sufficient frost to bring colour to the cheek.

That morning the church which stood at the eastern end of the village had been thronged with devout worshippers. The sturdy farmers of the district for miles around had gathered to hear the good rector read the service and listen to the beautiful hymns appropriate to the day sung by the village choir. Such strains were well calculated to inspire their hearts with thankfulness that their lot had been cast in a goodly land, where Nature smiled on the toil of the husbandman and where peace and prosperity was their portion. In all America there was not a more prosperous village than Newark, nor was there in the wide continent a region fairer to the eye or more blessed with good gifts than the Niagara district. Settled by a band of expatriated Loyalists at the close of the Revolutionary war, the dense wilderness, which had been untouched for a thousand years, had given place to fine farms and pleasant orchards. The log houses of the first settlement period had disappeared, and comfortable farm houses with ample barns filled with the products of the field dotted the entire district. In this fair region Newark itself, although not a village in size, formed, with its Government house, its church and its stores a sort of rustic metropolis of no mean character.

Newark had many happy homes on the Christmas of 1811, but none happier than that of Squire Wright, whose house stood on a plot of rising ground a little to the westward of the main part of the village. The house was a square old fashioned mansion of ample size, with a fine garden and orchard adjoining it, and a pretty lawn in front. Everything about the place bespoke comfort and even wealth, for Squire Wright was a rich man for the place and time, and could justly boast that all he possessed had been made by himself in the pursuit of honest industry. Edward Wright's career had been a remarkable example of the success which comes from good conduct and patient effort when united. He was a native of England and when quite a youth had enlisted in the army. Distinguished by his size and fine military bearing he attracted the notice of Major Simcoe, and when that officer was appointed to the command of the Queen's Rangers in 1777 Wright went with him. At the battle of Monmouth he saved his commander's life, and was wounded by a bullet which he carried to the grave. In the affair at Spencer's Ordinary Sergt. Wright received a severe sabre cut in the face, but he was speedily on duty again and remained with the corps until the surrender at Saratoga. Then he went to England with Simcoe but presently came out to Canada. When Simcoe, then a general, became Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada in 1792 he was greatly pleased to find his old friend Wright residing on the Niagara frontier. By Simcoe's advice Wright engaged in trade at Newark and was so successful that ten years later he was able to retire with a handsome competency. This step was rendered necessary by his failing health, for although hardly more than sixty at the time this story opens, his constitution had become undermined by the severe wounds he had received and the hardships of many campaigns. Wright long before had become a magistrate and was regarded as one of the chief men of the district.

Squire Wright's hospitable table presented a cheerful aspect on that Christmas day when hosts and guests were gathered around it at dinner. At its head sat the worthy Squire himself beaming with happiness and at the foot was Mrs. Wright, who had long been an invalid, but was ever cheerful and amiable. The Squire's eldest son Samuel, a substantial farmer who resided at Stony Creek, was there with his wife, while John Simcoe, the youngest son, a midshipman in His Majesty's Brig Rattler, but absent from his ship on leave, was also present. At the Squire's right was his old friend Rideout from Little York, who had arrived that very evening from the States, where he had been on business, and finding himself too late to reach home in time for his own Christmas dinner had invited himself to the Squire's. At the latter's left was Mary Wright, his beautiful daughter, a tall maiden of nineteen, whose bright face and hazel eyes were only matched by the exquisite melody of her voice,

which had sounded sweet and clear over all the others as she sang in the church that morning. By her side was her affianced lover, William Sutherland, whose deeper tones had mingled with hers in the singing of that day.

William Sutherland was a model of manly beauty and strength. A broad forehead crowned by waving brown locks, a straight and somewhat prominent nose, blue gray eyes and a firm mouth and chin, made up the outward aspect of the man, and were his passports to female favour, while his strength and vigour commended him to all men. Sutherland was just twenty-five, and had been for four or five years the principal blacksmith of the village, so that his muscular arm had acquired its power by legitimate use. Possibly the Squire and his good wife might have cherished more ambitious views with regard to their only daughter than were involved in her marriage to a blacksmith; but if so, they never gave utterance to their thoughts. As for Mary Wright herself, she thought William Sutherland the embodiment of all that was noble and manly, and might have said with Miranda:—

"My affections
Are then most humble; I have no ambition
To see a goodlier man."

There were always two standing toasts at Squire Wright's table, which were never omitted on festive occasions: one was to the King, the other to the memory of his old Commander Simcoe. Both toasts had been drunk in silence, for Simcoe was dead and Wright had not got over the feelings of regret which the melancholy event had occasioned.

"I wish," said Wright, almost with a sigh, "that we had a man in Canada like Simcoe, now." It was the first expression that had been used at the dinner table which was out of harmony with the festive character of the occasion. It seemed like a note of discord, yet it was but an echo of what every man at the table had been pondering in his mind.

"Doubtless," responded Rideout, "it would be well to have such a man here as Simcoe was in his youth and strength, when he was at the head of his invincible Rangers, and chased the word-spinning Jefferson out of the capital of his own State, but I think we have a good man in Canada now, General Isaac Brock."

"That's well said," observed the Squire, "he is a good man and a practical man, but it is natural for me to think of General Simcoe, who was the best soldier that I ever met."

"Do you think, Rideout," asked Sutherland from the otherside of the table, "that there will be a war?"

"I don't see how it can be avoided," was the response. "When I was in New York a few days ago everybody was talking about invading Canada; indeed they look upon Canada as theirs already."

"They can't take Canada," said Sutherland, sententiously.

"I don't know," answered Rideout, "we have hardly any troops in the province and no forts worth talking about. We'll have a hard struggle, but I hope every Canadian will do his duty."

"I'll risk them," said Sutherland, who was the son of a Loyalist who had been maltreated and banished because he chose to differ in opinion from those lovers of liberty who tarred and feathered, assaulted and stoned all who did not agree with them.

Nothing more was said on the subject, which, being a disagreeable one, seemed to be dropped for the day by a sort of tacit consent. Christmas ended as joyfully as it began, but neither the Squire nor Sutherland were able to dismiss the thought of the threatened invasion of Canada from their minds.

Chapter II.

On the 26th June, 1812, about the middle of the afternoon, a horseman was ferried over the Niagara River from Black Rock to the Canadian shore. His weary look and mud-splashed raiment showed that he had travelled far and fast. His business was important and demanded haste, for he was carrying the news from New York to Col. Thomas Clark of Niagara Falls, that war had been declared, and that Canada was to be invaded. Next day the tidings had reached General Brock at York, and the business of preparing for the coming contest engrossed all minds.

Sutherland, who was a sergeant in the 2nd Lincoln Militia, happened to be at the Falls and to be in actual conversation with Col. Clark in regard to the business of the regiment when this messenger arrived. Thus it chanced that he was the first to carry the tidings of war to Newark and to warn the people there of the threatened invasion. Sutherland was a brave man, but his heart was heavy as he turned his steps towards Squire Wright's house that evening, and thought over all the dire possibilities which the contest might involve. It meant, at all events, the postponement of his marriage, which was to have taken place in the autumn, for domestic comfort was not to be thought of while the country was in danger.

(To be continued.)