

defenceless and indefensible. Little York then contained about 1000 inhabitants and was the seat of the government and legislature of Upper Canada. This fact gave it an adventitious importance. It possessed then, and does still, a very good harbour for vessels of moderate draught, perhaps the real secret of its future fortune. The young capital of a new born country, it was not, even then, unworthy of high aspirations. It had, already, become the residence of the chief officers of the legislature and government, of the dignitaries of the law, and the hierarchy of the church ; men living in modest affluence and noted for genial hospitality. Amongst them had settled many of the most distinguished of the U. E. Loyalist refugee families, whose proudest characteristic, engrafted on the native patriotism of the country, has produced a plant of indigenous growth unsurpassed in all the climates of the Empire. York was then the centre of the intelligence, the learning and of the nascent progress of the land, and it has well fulfilled its promising destiny.

Little York is now the beautiful city of Toronto, containing 50,000 inhabitants,—a mart of commerce, a school of learning, the abode of energy and enterprise, talent and taste. It is adorned by some of the finest edifices, public and private, in Canada. The buildings of the University would add embellishment to Oxford. The law courts rival in elegance those of Dublin. The Bank of Toronto would adorn Pall Mall.

In April, 1813, the town was a scattered collection of low-roofed villas, embowered in apple orchards. An old French Fort or earth-work, constructed to resist the Indians, stood on the shore of the lake about a mile from the inhabited part of the Bay. Two embra, sured field works, dignified by the name of batteries, covered the entry to the harbour. These works were armed with three old French 24 pound guns, captured in 1760 ; the trunnions had been knocked off at the time, but, for the nonce, they had been exhumed

from the sand and clamped down upon pine logs, extemporized as carriages. The town was entirely open in the rear and on the flanks, an easy prey to an enemy waging war in the spirit of a buccaneer. An unfinished ship of war on the stocks, was, in a military point of view, the only legitimate object of attack ; and her destruction might have been, at any time, effected by a couple of boat's crews.

This ship had been laid down as before said, in the preceding year, when the British had the command of the lake, and expected to keep it, and would have done so, had the Imperial government shown befitting energy at the outset, or had the later inspirations of Sir Isaac Brock been listened to. But the pall of an enforced procrastination hung over the Provincial authorities. A lofty disbelief in the wickedness of man, and in the imminence of a war, had paralyzed and neutralized the precautions judiciously commenced, and the Americans had been permitted to gain the ascendancy. The ship could not be taken to pieces, nor, in the winter, be dis-embedded from the ice. All that could be done under the circumstances was to push on the work,—as a happy-go-lucky experiment—to complete and save her, if it might so chance ; and, if not,—to destroy her.

Commodore Chauncey, and General Dearborn, the American General in Chief, after due deliberation, preferred a cheap predatory certainty at York to a glorious uncertainty at Kingston.; and on the 25th April,—at a period of the season when the Lower St. Lawrence was barred by rugged piles of rotting ice—when roads and rivers were impassable, and all assistance, support, or supply, impossible,—the American squadron left Sackett's Harbour, sixteen sail of vessels, conveying a land force of 2,500 men. •

Videttes had been, long before, posted, in constant watch, on Scarborough Heights, with orders to fire alarm guns, and, on sight of a hostile fleet, to ride into town. It was late on the evening of

the 26th April, when the first report hushed every voice, and stilled for a moment the startled hearts of a whole population. Night fell as the news arrived, and with it came hurry, confusion and dismay. We read of such things, and in the interest of the story, lose sight of the agony of the hour, when the tide of terror topples over the dyke which has sustained it so long, and drowns out human endurance, sense, and reason. Whatever may have been the expectation and preparation,—whatever the hopes and fears ; it is a tremendous thing to realize,—that the spoiler is at the door, that the happy home may be given to the flames, that the tender wife and radiant children of to-day may be outcasts and wanderers to-morrow. The excited mind aggravates and exaggerates these apprehensions. It may be picturesque to tell of, but it is an appalling thing to see—

The thronging citizens with terror dumb,  
Who whisper with white lips, "The foe, they come, they come!"

At the same time, it is wholesome to remind the present generation of the experience of the past.

But the men of Toronto paused not long to whisper, nor could white lips be said to be, in any way, prevalent. The bounding blood stood still, for an instant only—men, who saw the whole extent of the danger, who knew the impotence of defence, also knew their duty, and every pulse of the popular heart throbbed with the rage of resistance. Old and young, rich and poor, high and low, rushed to arms. The maimed, the wounded, the invalid, the reckless school-boy, the grave judge of the land,—all shouldered their muskets, and fell into the ranks. McLean, clerk of the House of Assembly, seized his rifle, and was killed at early dawn among the men of the 8th. Young Allan MacNab, a lad of 14 years, whose name has been, ever since, identified with Canadian story, stood side by side with a veteran father, shattered with wounds, sire and son,

equally eager for the fray. But the British force was utterly inadequate for resistance. Altogether, it did not exceed 600 men. Two companies of the 8th or " King's Own " were accidentally in the town on their way from Kingston to reinforce the garrison of Niagara, and unhappily swelled the slaughter with but little service to the cause.

This force was under the command of Major General Roger Hailles Sheaffe, an old and brave officer, who, after the death of Brock, had retrieved the fight on Queenston Heights, and had been honoured for his success by a Baronetcy. Sheaffe was a Massachusetts boy, born in Boston, educated from an early age for the army, into which he entered young, under the powerful influence of the house of Northumberland. In the 49th foot, he served, side by side with Brock in the West Indies, in Holland and at Copenhagen, and with his revered comrade came to Canada. Here he encountered, after many years of separation, his cousin Margaret, daughter of John Coffin, a U. E. Loyalist refugee,\* who

---

The Loyalist refugees from the United States in those days, found the pathway of flight a hard road to travel. Roads between the inhabited parts of the States and Canada, there were none. The only communication for a family laden with its household goods was by water. A large number of the refugee Loyalist families from the Eastern and Middle States of the seaboard of America found their way into Canada by the river Hudson, Lake Champlain, and the river Richelieu, to Sorel. From this point they took a fresh departure up the St. Lawrence to Kingston, or Little York or Newark, and intermediate places of settlement. The family of the late Sir John Beverly Robinson came into Canada by this route.

John Coffin, named in the text, brought his family round from Boston to Quebec in a schooner which, being the conjoint property of himself and a partner, who adhered to the Republican party, was shortly after captured by a British cruiser, and declared good prize. John Coffin, with nine children reached Quebec in 1775. In 1778 he was proscribed by name in the " Boston

had followed the colours under which Sheaffe fought, from Boston to Quebec. An old attachment was revived between the cousins, strengthened by the romantic incidents of many chequered years, and in 1808 they were married. He had left his wife and young children at Quebec, and his military headquarters were at Fort George. Having succeeded on the death of Brock to the civil as well as the military command in Upper Canada, York was of course the seat of his Provincial government, but at the time of the descent he was almost, by mere chance, on the spot.

---

Confiscation Act,"\* and his property confiscated as a penalty for his adherence to the Royal cause. His return to Massachusetts would have been visited by death without benefit of clergy.

He was in Quebec, under arms, during the siege 1775-76. On the memorable morning of the 1st Jan., 1776, John Coffin defended the same battery at the *Pres de Ville*, in the Lower Town of Quebec, with the well-known Captain Barnsfare, when assailed by the American forces. In front of this battery fell General Montgomery, and the chief officers of his staff, and with them the last hopes of the American cause in Canada. The following documents which remain in the possession of the family, prove by the best evidence, that whatever may be the merit justly ascribed to Captain Barnsfare for the defence

---

\* "Boston Confiscation Act," Sept., 1778, ch. 48.—"In Massachusetts a person suspected of enmity to the Whig cause, could be arrested under a Magistrate's warrant, and banished, unless he would swear fealty to the friends of liberty; and the select men of towns could prefer charges of political treachery in town meetings; and the individual thus accused, if convicted by a jury, could be sent into the enemy's jurisdiction. Massachusetts also designated by name and, generally, by occupation and residence, three hundred and eight of her people, of whom seventeen had been inhabitants of Maine, who had fled from their houses, and denounced against any one of them who should return, apprehension, imprisonment, and transportation to a place possessed by the British, and for a second voluntary return, without leave, death without benefit of clergy. By another law, the property of twenty-nine persons, who were denominated "notorious conspirators," was confiscated—of these fifteen had been appointed "Mandamus councillors," two had been Governors, one Lieut.-Governor, one Treasurer, one Attorney General, one Chief Justice, and four Commissioners of Customs.—[Lorenzo Sabine, Historical Essay prefixed to Biographical Sketches of the American Loyalists, p. 78.

of this post, an equal measure of praise was, at least, due to the American Loyalist, John Coffin.

The first of these letters was written by Sir Guy Carleton, afterwards Lord Dorchester, who was Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Province of Quebec, and who was in Quebec during the whole siege.

JENNINGSBURY, Dec. 25, 1779.

SIR,—I have received your letter, and am sorry to learn your brother's misfortunes render it now necessary for him to apply for any assistance beyond his own industry, having observed in all his conduct from his arrival in the Province of Quebec until I left it, a constant attachment and zeal for the king's service, as well as the manner of a prudent, worthy man, I could not but interest myself for him; yet his conduct and judicious behaviour on the morning of the 31st Dec., 1775, gave him a still stronger claim on me; for to him *with the assistance of Barnsfare*, I attribute the repulse of the rebels on the side of Quebec when Mr. Montgomery attacked in person, while the success on the other was very different, and brought the town into no small danger. Now, whether we consider the strength of the post, the number allotted to its defence, or the former services of the officer who commanded, we might have expected as much at least from him—a remarkable proof this, that former services and greater numbers may be outdone by superior vigilance and good sense of gentlemen, though not used to arms. After all this, sir, I cannot but lament, that it is nowise in my power to forward Mr. Coffin's wishes; I might, 'tis true, bear witness to his merits, but this probably would hurt not serve, such is the state of things. I have, therefore, only to assure you of my esteem for him, and that I am

Sir,

Your most obedient and most humble Servant,

(Signed,) GUY CARLETON.

To Mr. NATHANIEL COFFIN,

Pall Mall, London.

The second is a letter written by Colonel Allan McLean, H. M. 87th Regt., commanding the garrison during the siege of Quebec, 1775-76.

QUEBEC, 28th July, 1776.

Sia,—As I am in a few days going to England with dispatches from the Commander-in-Chief, I should be glad to know if I could be of any service to you: power to do you any material service I have none; but your conduct

during the siege of Quebec last winter and spring makes it a duty on my part to give you my testimony and approbation of every part of your conduct. Truth must always have some weight with his Majesty and his Ministers, who, I am certain, wish to reward deserving men like you. To your resolution and watchfulness on the night of Dec. 31st, 1775, in keeping the guard at the *Pres de Ville* under arms waiting for the attack which you expected ; the great coolness with which you allowed the rebels to approach ; the spirit which your example kept up among the men ; and the very critical instant in which *you directed* Captain Barnsfare's fire against Montgomery and his troops ;—to those circumstances, alone, I do ascribe the repulsing of the rebels from that important post, where, with their leader, they lost all heart.

The resolutions you entered into, and the arrangements you made to maintain that post, when told you were to be attacked from another quarter, was worthy of a good subject, and would have done honour to an experienced officer. I thought it incumbent on me to leave with you this honourable testimony of your service, as matters that were well known to myself in particular ; and I should be happy at any time to have it in my power to be useful to you, and do assure you that I am with truth and regard,

Sir,

Your most obedient humble Servant,

(Signed,) ALLAN MACLEAN.

To Ma. JOHN COFFIN, Quebec.

The third is a communication signed Henry Caldwell, Lieut.-Colonel commanding the British Militia at the siege of Quebec. This gentleman was father to Sir John, and grandfather to the late Sir Henry—Baronets of that name. He certifies by a document given under his hand at Quebec, May, 1787, that "John Coffin, Esquire, served in the British militia, under my command, during the siege of this town by the rebels, from Nov. seventy-five to May seventy-six, during all which time he conducted himself and behaved with the greatest spirit, zeal, and activity in the king's service, which by his example was very much promoted, particularly on the attack of the 31 at Dec., when he very much distinguished himself."

He left a large family—four daughters : the eldest married Colonel McMurdo ; the second, the Hon. John Craigie, brother to Lord Craigie, Edinburgh ; a son of this lady is now a British Admiral ; the third became Lady Sheaffe ; the fourth died in Quebec.

And seven sons. One was killed, a Lieutenant in the Navy ; another, Francis Holmes, rose to the rank of Admiral in the same noble service ; two died high in rank in the Commissariat—one a Major in the Army ; a sixth was member Legislative Council, and Colonel Mil., Lower Canada ; and a seventh Adj.-General Militia, Upper Canada.

His descendants reflect with pride, that the above-named exiles earned their rank by long and faithful services ; but it is a subject of still greater pride to acknowledge that they all owed their opportunity to the devoted loyalty which has ever characterized their family, and to the generous appreciation of it by their Sovereign and country.

These descendants in Canada and in England are many. Among those in Canada may be named Mrs. Hamilton of Quebec, mother of Robert Hamilton, Esquire, and of the Hon. John Hamilton of Hawkesbury, C. W., Mrs. Dean, wife of James Dean, Esquire, Quebec, and William Holmes Coffin, Prothonotary of the Superior Court in Montreal.

## CHAPTER IX.

Sheaffe. Force at his disposal. His dispositions. MacNeil of the 8th. American approach—Disembark in Humber Bay—Gallant resistance—Slaughter of the Grenadiers. Pike lands—Presses on the town—Enters the old fort—Explosion—Destruction of friend and foe. Pike killed. Sheaffe retires. The place capitulates. American Vandalism. Bishop Strachan. His admirable letter. The farce which follows the tragedy. The "human scalp" turns out to be a perriwig.

As many imputations, some thoughtless, many reckless—all equally unjust and ungenerous—have been cast upon the reputation of Sir Roger Sheaffe in relation to the defence of York, it may be allowed to a kindred hand, in this place, to vindicate his memory.

York in itself was incapable of defence. All the troops in Western Canada would have been insufficient to protect it. The regular garrison, if it can be so termed, consisted of a company of Glengarries and 50 men of the Royal Newfoundland regiment, apart from the militia. This force had been augmented accidentally, as has been before said, by two companies of the King's Regiment under Captain McNeil. Sheaffe's first duty as a soldier, and as a general, looking to the defence of his military command, was, to abandon a place never intended to have been defended, and to preserve his force for the protection of the country. The capture of this detachment, at this time, would have been an irretrievable loss, and, in its effects, fatal to the Province.

His first duty, therefore, was, to destroy all public property which would otherwise benefit the enemy, and to fall back either on Kingston or Niagara. The direction of this movement depended

on the developments of the enemy. If they had landed on the side of the Don, he would have retired on Burlington heights. They assailed him on the west, and he withdrew towards Kingston. General Armstrong, the American Secretary at war, wrote to General Dearboin, privately, from Washington, 13th May, 1813 : " We cannot doubt but that in all cases in which a British commander is constrained to act defensively, his policy will be that adopted by Sheaffe, to prefer the preservation of his troops to that of his post, and thus carrying off the kernel leave us only the shell."\* If York had been left defenceless and unprotected ; if a ship of war in the hands of the shipwright had been recklessly exposed to destruction, the fault was not with Sheaffe, nor with his direct superior Sir George Prevost, as charged by Veritas, but with the authorities in England who trifled with the emergency until too late, and then, spent treasures in life and money to repair an irreparable error.

On the first alarm, Sheaffe had got his men in hand, and awaited what the morning should bring forth. At early dawn, the American squadron was seen bearing down on Gibraltar Point, and the western flank of the town. The plan of attack was at once disclosed. The mouth of the harbour was the threatened point. While the ships of war engaged the three mutilated guns, an overwhelming force would be thrown ashore, and all retreat to the west would be cut off. Sheaffe, thereupon, detached the best part of his force to keep the enemy at bay, to check the advance, to afford time for the destruction of public property, and to cover his slow retreat to Kingston. Captain McNeil, at the head of the two companies of the 8th, was ordered on this service, about 200 militia rallied on the flanks of the regulars, and Colonel Givens, with a small body of Indians, always notable in the war, already

---

\* Armstrong, Vol. I, p. 87.