

THE HESSIAN SOLDIERS

CHARACTER OF THE TROOPS HIRED BY KING GEORGE.

HOW THE MEN WERE RECRUITED—COLLECTED TOGETHER AND DRIVEN OFF LIKE CATTLE—CRUEL MEASURES TO PREVENT DESERTION—THE RANK AND FILE.

DRESDEN, Nov. 20.—The soldiers whom the Landgrave of Hesse Cassel and the other German Princes had let out to England for the suppression of the American rebellion were brought together, in great measure, by the recruiting system. Some alterations had, it is true, been introduced into this system in Cassel by the adoption of a new plan similar to that of Prussia. The country was cut up into districts, each of which was to furnish a given number of recruits to a certain regiment. But this measure does not seem sensibly to have diminished the activity of the old-fashioned recruiting officers or to have improved the spirit of the Army; nor does it appear to have existed in most of the States. Parties or single officers were sent all over Germany to coax or force men into the service. Persons who were not born subjects of the Prince were preferred, on the ground that natives could always be called in in case of need, and it was published in the Army regulations that officers would especially recommend themselves by their zeal in enlisting foreigners. Spendthrifts, loose livers, drunkards, arguers, restless people, and such as made political trouble, if not more than 60 years old and of fair health and stature, were forced into the ranks. The present of a tall, strapping fellow was an acceptable gift from one Prince to another, and in every regiment were many deserters from the service of neighboring States. Together with this mixed rabble served the honest peasant lads of Germany, forced from their plows. It may be noted as a general rule in respect to the regiments sent to America that those first furnished by any given Prince would contain a larger proportion of his own subjects, and a better set of men generally, than those subsequently levied.

Johann Gottfried Seume, who afterward attained some prominence as a writer, was a victim of the recruiting system, and has given an account of his adventures. Seume was a theological student at Leipzig, and having conceived religious doubts which he knew would be offensive to his friends, left that city on foot for Paris, with a sword at his side, a few shirts, and a few volumes of the classics in his knapsack, and about 9 thalers in his pocket. His journey, however, was destined to take a different direction. "The third night I spent at Bach," writes he, "and here the Landgrave of Cassel, the great broker of men of the time, undertook, through his recruiting officers and in spite of my protestations, the care of my future quarters on the road to Ziegenhayn, to Cassel and thence into the New World. I was brought, under arrest, to Ziegenhayn, where I found many companions in misfortune from all parts of the country. There we waited, to be sent to America in the Spring, after Faucitt should have inspected us. I gave myself up to my fate, and tried to make the best of it, bad as it was. We staid a long time at Ziegenhayn before the necessary number of recruits was brought together from the plow, the highways, and the recruiting stations. The story of those times is well known. No one was safe from the grip of the seller of souls. Persuasion, cunning, deception, force—all served. No one asked what means were used to the damnable end. Strangers of all kinds were arrested, imprisoned, sent off. They tore up my academic matriculation papers, as the only instrument by which I could prove my identity. At last I fretted no more. One can live anywhere. You can stand what so many do. The idea of crossing the ocean was inviting enough to a young fellow, and there were things worth seeing on the other side. So I reflected. While we were at Ziegenhayn old Gen. Gore employed me in writing, and treated me very kindly. Here was an indescribable lot of human beings brought together, good and bad, and others that were both by turns. My comrades were a runaway son of the Muses, from Jena; a bankrupt tradesman, from Vienna; a fringe-maker, from Hanover; a discharged secretary in the Post Office, from Gotha; a monk, from Würzburg; an upper steward, from Meiningen; a Prussian Sergeant of Hussars; a cashiered Hessian Major, from the fortress itself, and others of like stamp. One can imagine that there was entertainment enough, and a mere sketch of the life of these gentry would make amusing and instructive reading." A plot was gotten up among this rabble. Seume was offered the command of the conspirators, but, by the advice of an old Sergeant, declined the dangerous honor. The mutineers were to rise in the night, surprise the guard and take their weapons, hew down such as opposed them, spike the cannon, lock up the officers at headquarters, and march 1,500 strong across the frontier, which was but a few miles away. The plot was disclosed. The ringleaders were arrested, Seume among them. He was soon released, however, for too many men were implicated to allow the punishment of all concerned. "The trial went on," he says; "two were condemned to the gallows, as I should certainly have been had not the old Prussian Sergeant-Major saved me. The remainder had to run the gantlet a great many times, from 36 to 12. It was a terrible butchery. The candidates for the gallows were pardoned after suffering the fear of death under that instrument, but had to run the gantlet 36 times, and were sent to Cassel to be kept in irons at the mercy of the Prince. 'For an indefinite time' and 'at mercy' were then equivalent expressions, and meant 'forever without release.' At least the mercy of the Prince was an affair that no one wanted to have anything to do with. More than 30 were terribly treated in this way; and many, of whom I was one, were let off only because too many of the accomplices would have had to be punished. Some came out of prison when we marched away, for reasons which were easy to understand; for a fellow that's in irons at Cassel is not paid for by the British."

With troops collected as these were, desertion was necessarily common. The military service was dreaded, and in the smaller States a run of a few miles would take the deserter beyond the frontiers. The people sympathized with him and would gladly help him, if not restrained by terrible punishments. These, however, were not wanting. In Würtemberg, when the alarm was given the parish must instantly rise and occupy roads, paths, and bridges for 24 hours, or until the fugitive was caught. Should he escape, the place must furnish a substitute as tall as the deserter, and the sons of the principal man of the village were first liable. This order was to be read every month from the pulpit. Whoever helped a deserter lost his civil rights and was imprisoned with hard labor and flogged in prison. The laws of Hesse-Cassel appear to have been a little less savage. Peasants arresting a deserter received a Ducat, but if the fugitive passed through a village without being arrested the village was liable to pay for him. Every soldier going more than a mile from his garrison was to be furnished with a pass, and all persons meeting him at a greater distance from home were required to demand it. A characteristic incident occurred in 1738. A Prussian recruiting officer and a Prussian soldier's wife induced a Bayreuth soldier to desert for the purpose of re-enlisting in the Prussian Army. The woman was hanged; the officer was obliged to be present at her execution, and was then locked up in a fortress. The deserter seems to have escaped with his life, being enlisted his recruit, perhaps under a foreign jurisdiction, the officer was obliged to get him to his garrison. This would, of course, afford opportunities for desertion, and Kapp quotes from a book printed in Berlin as late as 1805 the precautions to be taken against this danger. The under officer who is escorting this recruit must wear sword and pistol. He must make the recruit walk in front of him, and warn him that a single false step may cost him his life. He must avoid large towns and places where the recruit has previously served as much as possible. It is also desirable to avoid the place where the recruit was born. They must spend the night at inns where the landlord is known to be well disposed to recruiting officers, and sure to side with them and not with their victim. The recruit and the officer must both undress, and their clothes be given to the landlord for safe-keeping. Inns where recruits are to spend the night must have a separate room for the purpose, if possible up stairs, and with iron-barred windows. A light must be kept burning all night, and the under officer must give up his weapons to the landlord, for fear the recruit should get them away from him and use them against him in the night. In the morning he must get them back, see to the loading and priming, dress

himself, and be ready for his journey before the clothes of the recruit are brought to him. The recruit must enter a house or a room first, he must come out last. At meals he must sit behind the table, next to the wall. If he shows signs of being troublesome, the straps and buttons must be cut off his breeches, and he must hold them up with his hands. A good dog trained to the business was found to be very useful to an under officer in such circumstances. If an under officer is unfortunately obliged to kill or wound a recruit he must bring a paper from the local magistrate. But no document will excuse the escape of a recruit, an accident which the Prussian military imagination refuses to consider ever necessary.

The men collected to serve in America were of various qualities from a military point of view. They were all received and examined by English Commissioners at the seaports, before shipment, and while some of the regiments were pronounced excellent, others were said to be partly made up of old men and boys, unfit to endure the hardships of a campaign. Some soldiers were rejected for these causes, especially in the latter years of the war, when good men were harder to get in many of the States. It is not easy with the documents before me to judge what chance a private had of promotion from the ranks. Seume writes that he himself had hopes in that direction, which were shattered by the ending of the war, as in time of peace no one who was not noble could aspire to be anything more than a Sergeant-Major. Kapp speaks of the officers as belonging mostly to the lower nobility. The list of Hessian officers (Hesse-Cassel) in 1779, as given by Eelking, does not bear out these statements. It appears that at that time the majority of the officers were not noble, nobility being judged by the presence or absence of the mystic particle *von*. Especially was this the case in the ranks below that of Major, where the officers of common birth outnumbered the nobles nearly two to one. Of the Majors, 8 were noble, 11 not noble. Of Generals, Colonels, and Lieutenant-Colonels, 28 were noble and 9 not noble. It would seem from these figures that the commoner must have found a sticking point in his advancement at the rank of Major. It is, however, probable that superior officers of merit were often ennobled. Of Quartermasters, Adjutants, Commissaries, doctors, chaplains, &c., none were nobles except the Quartermaster-General and one Adjutant. Again, in some regiments the proportion of noble officers was much larger than in others. The relation between officers and soldiers was, of course, thoroughly despotic, but tempered at times by good-nature toward particular soldiers. Thus Seume, who was educated, and a favorite, was on terms of intimacy with some of the officers of his regiment.

We come at last to the character of the officers. Their education was generally confined to a limited amount of writing and a little barbarous French. They understood neither the cause for which the Americans were fighting, nor the language in which the statesmen of both contending parties argued their different claims. But had they understood far more than they did, their sympathies would still have been on the side of royal prerogative against popular freedom. This was not necessary to make them go where they were ordered, nor would it have prevented many of them from heartily wishing themselves at home again, after a campaign or two in America. The Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel took a personal interest in his troops when on foreign service. He corresponded with the officers and meted out praise and blame. He refused promotion to those who had been captured at Trenton until they had effaced that disgrace by subsequent good conduct. As for the rank and file, in spite of the gross injustice with which they had been treated, there are many signs that these involuntary volunteers were not such bad fellows after all. The Germans have their fair share of those virtues which every nation is fond of claiming as its peculiar birthright—honesty, courage, kindness. The motley mass had been shaped and welded by a rigorous, if often cruel, discipline. These were no free-lances, but modern soldiers. They could not wipe out to American eyes the shame of their mercenary calling. But the shame fairly belonged to their Princes and not to themselves. In the field or in captivity, they often deserved, and sometimes obtained, the respect of their opponents. Many of them became, in the end, citizens of the Republic they were sent to destroy.

It is not many years since survivors of our own Revolutionary Army were still living among us. They were duly honored by the people, and as their ranks became thinned by time, were in great request for Fourth of July celebrations and patriotic banquets. A story was then current that in a certain village on the eve of the Fourth the committee found themselves without a revolutionary veteran. The local soldier had died, or been enticed away to the more splendid festivities of a neighboring town. What was to be done? Some one at last suggested that an old man had appeared that day at the inn. He looked old enough to be a veteran. There was no harm in asking. A sub-committee waited on the stranger and announced its errand. Oh, yes! He had fought in the Revolution. The old man was given a prominent place next day in the procession, and a high seat at the banquet. His health was drank, and he rose to respond. "Ladies and gentlemen," said the old man, "I fought in the Revolution. Unfortunately, I fought on the wrong side. I am one of the Hessians." A murmur went through the patriotic assembly. An imaginative lady thought she smelt sulphur. The committee were aghast. "But," continued the veteran, "we were beaten, and I'm glad of it. I settled here in America, and have been a good citizen these 50 years. God save the United States!" He sat down amid thunders of applause, and the inhabitants of that village were unanimous that they had never had so successful a Revolutionary veteran.

E. J. T.