

Letter VII

Wherein young John Smith described the bravery of the Smithville detachment in “toeing the mark,” and also their unparalleled success in capturing the British Lion.

Dear General. ----- I’ve got another letter from my son John down to the boundary war; and as I ‘spose you like to have’em pretty well by your putting of’em in your papers, I make haste to send you a copy of this by the first post. It is as follers,

*Our Disputed Territory pretty near the Line, on
Fitzherbert’s farm, March 25, 1839.*

Dear Father----- We stick by here yet, takin’ care of our disputed territory and the logs; and while we stay here the British will have to walk as straight as a hair, you may depend. We ain’t had much fighting to do since my last letter; and some how or other, things seem to be getting cooler down here a little, so that I’m afraid we ain’t going to have the real scratch, after all, that I wanted to have. A day or two arter we took the logging camp and brought the men and oxen off here prisoners of war, we was setting in the fort after dinner and talking matters over,

and Sargent Johnson was wondering what a plague was the reason the British didn't come up to the scratch as they talked on. He said he guessed they wasn't sich mighty fairce fellers for war as they pretended to be, arter all.

"Well," said Colonel Jarvis, "I got some dispatches from Governor Fairfield this morning, that says Sir John Harvey seems to be a little inclined to haul in his horns; and I don't believe they'll try to drive us out of our disputed territory, or come a near us. But still the governor says we must hold on and look out sharp, for he don't know how 'twill turn out yet; and we must keep possession of the territory, and not let any body come into it, nor any logs go out of it, till we have further orders."

"Well," says Sargent Johnson, "I don't like this staying about here doing nothing; I ain't used to it. If them British are any notion of coming here and having a tug with us, I wish they'd come and have it over. Why don't we go clear to the line, colonel? How do we know but what they'll get over this side on't sometimes, if we ain't there to see it? And besides, I want to *see* that boundary line, that I've heard so much tell of; and I'm determined to see it before I go home, if I have to march down to it all alone; so I can have it to tell my children of, when I get to be an old man, and can say to'em, I have seen the boundary line myself, and marched clear down to it and stood on it."

Here I couldn't help putting in a word tu; and says I----

"So do I, colonel, I want to see that are boundary line, and go right up to it, and *toe the mark*; I never was dared to toe the mark yet, but what I did it, let who would stand t'other side. And I should like to go right up to this line, and put my toes on to it, and look over on to the British side, and stump them to come up if they dared. At that Colonel Jarvis turned round and looked at me, and haw-hawed right out; and, says he----

“Well done, John, you are growing quite wolfy. I like your spunk any how; but you are young and inexperienced, and don’t understand all the turns of the game exactly. You hain’t seen so much war as your old great grandfather has; you must try to keep cool and foller your officers.”

“But, colonel,” say I, “do you know grandfather?”

“Yes, I do,” says he; “I have heard him tell his war stories many a time. Didn’t he give you no good advice when you come away?”

“Nothing,” says I; “only he charged me not to be in too much of a hurry to fire.”

“Well,” says the colonel, “you’d better remember that advice, and foller it. And it’s a pity Billy Wiggins hadn’t a grandfather to advise him.”

At that Billy Wiggins rolled up his little gray eyes at the colonel, and fairly looked red; and says Billy, says he----

“Well, colonel, my gun goes too easy, and I can’t help it. I’ve been squirrel hunting with it so much, it’ll almost go off itself, before you think on’t.

“But this ain’t what we was talking about,” said Sargent Johnson; “and don’t see as it brings us any nearer the line. As I said afore, colonel, I don’t like this staying about here and doing nothing; and if things are getting cooled down a little, so as like as not we shall have to go off home pretty soon, I think the sooner we take a peep at this boundary line the better.”

The colonel said, the boundary line wasn’t but a few miles off, and we was as near to it now as ‘twas prudent to have our head-quarters. We’d got a good strong place here on Fitzherbert’s farm for a fort, and we must stick by it and keep it well manned and guarded. And he said, bein’ Sargent Johnson and his company was so good on a scouting-party, and did so

well t'other day when we took the logging camp, he didn't keer if we tried it again the next day. We might go out and scour round awhile, and see if we could find any more trespassers, and go down as far as the line if we'd a mind to; only be careful and not get over on t'other side of the line; for if the British nabb'd us there, we should be lawful game, and it would be hard work to make'em give us up.

So we was all alive in a minute, fitting out for a new campaign. We went to work and rubbed our guns, and put new flints into'em, and got'em so they'd go as quick as a stream of lightning. And the next morning we was up by the times and got our breakfasts, and filled our knapsacks, and started off. We hunted round most all the forenoon to find some more trespassers, but we couldn't find hide nor hair if a single one. We thought we must be pretty near the line, and sometimes we begun to feel a little skittish for fear we might get acrost and not know it, and the British might hop up behind some of the old logs and trees and nab us before we could have time to aim at'em. Bime-by Billy Wiggins started on ahead of us and run like a two-year old, up on to a hill there was a little ways ahead; and then he begun to climb a slim, tall pine tree, and he hitched and scabbled up as fast as a young bear.

“What upon earth,” said Sargent Johnson, “is Billy arter now?”

“A squirrel, I guess,” said I; “I'll bet a potato, Billy has treed a squireel.”

When we got along up a little nearer, Sargent Johnson called out to him to know what he was doing up there.

“I'm jest a looking off here to see if *I can see the line*,” said Billy, stretching his neck away to the eastward, and looking with all the eyes in his head.

“Well, do you see it?” said Sargent Johnson.

“See it? No;” said Billy, “I don’t see nothing but woods, and woods as far as I can see.

Sargent Johnson told him he guessed he would see it quicker if he was down on the ground, than he would up there. So Billy come down again, and we jogged along. Bime-by we come to a tree that had some old marks and spots on two sides of it. And we looked along north and south of this tree, for Sargent Johnson said the line runs due north from the monument, and we found some more trees marked and spotted jest like it.

“Ah,” says Sargent Johnson, “we’ve found it. This is the boundary line we’ve heard so much tell of; we’ve got it at last. Now look and see if you can see the British on t’other side of it; and let every man hold on to his gun and be ready to fire if I say the word.

We looked across the line, and looked and looked, but we couldn’t see nothin’ but trees, and bushes, and woods, and swamps. We hollered across the line as hard as we could holler, to see if we could raise any of the British, for we all felt as if we wanted to have a brush. And we thought at first they answered us; but when we come to holler again, we found it was only the echo of our own voices, that come back from the hills a little ways off. So we marched along on the line two or three miles, but we couldn’t see nor hear nothin’ of nobody. At last we sot down and got the victuals out of our knapsacks and eat our dinners; and rested awhile. When we got ready to start again to go back to our fort, Sargent Johnson said we should give the British one broadside before we left’em, just to let’em know what the Yankee boys are made of. So he told us to see that our guns was all right; and then he ordered us to stand up all in a

row, and *toe the line*, facing to the British side; and then he give us off the word-----

“Make ready, take aim---fire.”

“There,” says Sargent Johnson, “now I can go home contented, war or no war; for we’ve pured one good grist into their own territory, and they may help themselves if they can.”

Then we put on our knapsacks and shouldered our guns and started back towards the fort. We fit our way along through the bushes and swampstwo or three miles, till we come out a little more into the upland, and as we was walking along and talking and telling how we guessed the British wouldn’t dare to come up and toe the line as we had done, all at once we come across a great track in the snow. We stopped and looked at it awhile,

But we couldn’t tell what sort of track it was. Some guessed it was a bear, and some guessed it was an ox, and some guessed it was a hoss, but they all said it didn’t look like nary one on’em. At last Billy Wiggins said, he didn’t believe but what it was the British Lion got over on to our side of the boundary line. At that we all had a good laugh, and Sargent Johnson said, if that was the case we’d have a hunt for him, for no British lion had a right to set his foot in our disputed territory. So we turned off and followed the track. Bime-by we looked away ahead a little ways among the trees, and there we see it.

“Twas a great critter, that looked like an ox, only it ‘twas about as tall and long as a hoss; and he had a great mess of horns sprangling out both sides of his head like a great bunch of dry hemlock knots.

“There,” says Billy Wiggins, “didn’t I tell you it was the British lion? Don’t you see his horns?”

“But, taint the lion that has horns, it’s a unicorn that has horns, according to my book,” said Jonathan Downing; “and I guess it’s a unicorn.”

“No,” says I, “taint a unicorn; unicorns don’t have but one horn, and this feller’s got a dozen.”

He stood with his head up, eating the bark off the limbs of the trees. And as soon as Sargent Johnson got up near so he could have a fair sight of him, he sang out, “it’s a moose---it’s a moose; now we’ll have some fun; now for a moose chase.

As soon as the moose see us, he jumped his whole length, and started to run. He threw his head back on his shoulders, and tipped it to one side, so as to bring one bunch of his horns over his back, while t’other bunch pined forward, so he could run between the trees and bushes; and he jumped and run like a young ox, and we arter him, as tight as we could spring. We couldn’t fire at first, for we had forgot to load our guns again arter firing our broadside on the line; and Sargent Johnson said it was no matter about stopping to load, for if we could get him in a good stout snow-bank, we could take him alive. So we pulled foot arter him as hard as we could go. Some of the way the snow was pretty deep, and so hard we could run on the top of it. But the moose broke trough almost every step, and he had sich hard work jumping and floundering along, he couldn’t gain ahead of us hardly a bit. At last he got kind of wedged up between some high rocks on one side, and some old trees that was blowed down on ‘tother side, and there he was, in as bad a fix as Billy Wiggins was, behind the great pine log that I told you about in my last letter. There was no chance for the poor moose to get away, but to turn right back and make his way right through among us. He looked round at us, and shook his head a few times, and bime-by he turned round and fetched a

spring and come right at us, full chisel. We sprung, some one way and some 'tother, and give him a chance to go by, and Jonathan Downing fetched him a lick across his nose with his gun, and broke his gun stock. But poor Billy Wiggins couldn't spring out of the way so quick as the rest of us, and the moose run right against him, and knocked him head-over-heels, as much as a rod, and the next jump he stepped on to one of Billy's legs, and broke it off as short as a pipe-stem. We run and helped Billy up, and found he wasn't hurt much, only his leg was broke; so Sargent Johnson told one of the men to stay by him, and we took after the moose again. After we chased him about half a mile further, he got into such a deep snow-bank, it stopped him. He jumped and floundered round, but he couldn't get out, and only got deeper and deeper into it, till at last he was all covered in the snow-bank, but his head and horns, and there he stuck, pretty well tired out. We walked right up to him. His eyes looked as wild as if he'd eat us up; but he couldn't help himself. We took some strong lines that we had with us, and tied 'em to his horns. On both sides of his head, and took a slip-nose round his nose, and trod the snow down, and got him out of the bank. We found, by trying him round a little, that we could manage him so as to lead him and drive him to the fort alive. So we sent two hands back to bring Billy Wiggins up; and they brought him along, and we took and set him a straddle of the moose, and told him to hold on to the horns. Then Sargent Johnson took command of the ropes on one side, and I on 'tother, and each of us took a hand to help us hold on, and Jonathan Downing took hold of the line that had the slip-nose round the nose, and went ahead to pick out the best path; and the other five went behind with sticks and whipped up. When we got all fixed, we started off and made pretty good headway. Poor Billy Wiggins begun to

cry some, and said he would never get home, now his leg was broke; but Sargent Johnson comforted him up, and told him “to never mind, for if he hadn’t his leg broke, he might never have had a chance to ride home to the fort in triumph on the British Lion.” At that Billy laughed, and seemed to be in pretty good spirits the rest of the way. We’d got out pretty near the fort before we ketched the moose, and a little before sunset we got out into the opening, and was marching up the hill towards the fort.

When we got pretty near, Colonel Jarvis come running to meet us, and says he,

“Sargent Johnson, what sort of a prisoner have you got here?”

“Why, this is the British Lion,” said Sargent Johnson; “we took him this side of the line, and, therefore, he’s fairly our prisoner.”

“You are the boys for me,” said the Colonel; and he went back and told the men, and they give three the loudest cheers for Sargent Johnson’s company that ever I heard. The Colonel had supper for us in a few minutes, and took Billy Wiggins into the hospital, and had his wounds dressed, and he bids fair to do well; and took the moose and tied him in the barn. Colonel Jarvis says we must keep him alive, and carry him home as a grand trophy of the war.

P.S.--- I want mother to send me down two pair of stockings and a pair of trousers, for we’ve got’em torn out terribly down here among the bushes. So I remain your loving son,

John.

Dear General----- Peter Smith, Esquire, Henry W. Smith,
Ensign John Smith, John Smith the fourth, Ichabod Smith the
second, Sam Smith the third, John Smith the ninth, and old Mr.
Zebedee Smith, and all his children, allwants you to send'em
your paper, beginning with the one that had my first letter in it.
Your friender and subscriber,

John Smith, Esquire