

Chapter I

Introductory

JPM recalls his childhood while living with his grandparents. Reflects on the outbreak of the Revolutionary War and his romantic notions about becoming a soldier.

Have patience just to hear me out;
And I'll tell you what I've been about.

The heroes of all Histories, Narratives, Adventures, Novels, and Romances have, or are supposed to have ancestors, or some root from which they sprang. I conclude, then, that it is not altogether inconsistent to suppose that I had parents too. I shall not undertake to trace my pedigree (like the Welsh) some thousand years beyond the creation; but just observe that my father was the son of a “substantial New England farmer,” (as we Yankees say) in the then colony, but now state of Connecticut, and county of Windham. When my father arrived at puberty he found his constitution too feeble to endure manual labor; he therefore directed his views to gaining a livelihood by some other means. He, accordingly, fitted himself for and entered as a student in Yale College, some time between the years 1750 and '55.

My mother was likewise a “farmer’s daughter”; her native place was in the county of New Haven, in the same state. She had a sister,

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married and settled in the vicinity of the college, who often boarded the students when sick. My father being once in that condition, and being at board at this aunt's, my mother happened to be there on a visit: My father seeing her, it seems, like a great many others in like circumstances, took a fancy to her, followed up his courtship, and very possibly obtained her consent as well as her parents—married her a year and a half before his collegial studies were ended, which (if known at the time) would have been cause of his expulsion from college; but it seems it never was known there, and he, of course, escaped a keelhauling.

After my father left college, he studied divinity, had “a call,” accepted it, and was settled in the county of Berkshire, in the (now) Commonwealth of Massachusetts, as a gospel minister of the Congregational order; in which county of Berkshire, I, the redoubtable hero of this Narrative, first made my appearance in this crooked, fretful world, upon the 21st day of November in the year 1760. I have been told that the day on which I was born was a thanksgiving day, which day is, generally, celebrated with good cheer. One might have thought it a little ominous being born on such a day, but I can assure the reader it was no omen of good to me, especially for the seven or eight years I was in the army—nor, indeed, ever since.

My grandsire, on my mother's side, having at this time no other daughter but my mother (my aunt, mentioned above being dead), she of course became the darling, for which reason, I suppose, I was his favorite grandson and received his Christian and surnames as my given name.

I lived with my parents until I was upwards of seven years old, when I went to live with this good old grandsire; for good he was, particularly to me. He was wealthy, and I had everything that was necessary for life, and as many superfluities as was consistent with my age and station. There were none belonging to the family, as constant residents, except the old gentleman, lady, and myself. It is true my grandsire kept me pretty busily employed, but he was kind to me in every respect, always gave me a playday when convenient, and was indulgent to me almost to a fault. Ah! I ought not to have left him while he lived; I fouled my own nest most sadly when I did it; but children “are full of notions.”

I remember the stir in the country occasioned by the Stamp Act, but I was so young that I did not understand the meaning of it; I likewise remember the disturbances that followed the repeal of the Stamp Act, until the destruction of the tea at Boston and elsewhere. I was then 13 or 14 years old and began to understand something of the works going

on. I used ... to inquire a deal about the French War, as it was called, which had not been long ended; my grandsire would talk with me about it while working in the fields, perhaps as much to beguile his own time as to gratify my curiosity. I thought then, nothing should induce me to get caught in the toils of an army. "I am well, so I'll keep," was my motto then, and it would have been well for me if I had ever retained it.

Time passed smoothly on with me till the year 1774 arrived. The smell of war began to be pretty strong, but I was determined to have no hand in it, happen when it might; I felt myself to be a real coward. What—venture my carcass where bullets fly! That will never do for me. Stay at home out of harm's way, thought I, it will be as much to your health as credit to do so. But the pinch of the game had not arrived yet; I had seen nothing of war affairs, and consequently was but a poor judge in such matters.

One little circumstance that happened in the autumn of this year will exhibit my military prowess, at this time, in a high point of view. In the afternoon, one Sabbath day, while the people were assembled at meeting, word was brought that the British (regulars, as the good people then called them) were advancing from Boston, spreading death and desolation in their route in every direction. What was the intent of spreading this rumor, I know not, unless it was to see how the people would stand affected; be it what it would, it caused me a terrible fright.¹ I went out of the house in the dusk of the evening, when I heard the sound of a carriage on the road in the direction of Boston. I thought they were coming as sure as a gun; I shall be dead or a captive before tomorrow morning. However, I went to bed late in the evening, dreamed of "fire and sword," I suppose, waked in the morning, found myself alive, and the house standing just where it did the evening before.

The winter of this year passed off without any very frightening alarms, and the spring of 1775 arrived. Expectation of some fatal event seemed to fill the minds of most of the considerate people throughout the country. I was ploughing in the field about half a mile from home,

¹ The story was only partially rumor. British regulars did indeed advance from Boston on September 1, 1774, to seize patriot artillery at Cambridge and a public store of gunpowder at Charlestown. Local citizens threatened armed resistance but did not engage the regulars. Still, word spread widely of a bloody encounter, causing some New Englanders to rush momentarily to arms.

about the 21st day of April, when all of a sudden the bells fell to ringing and three guns were repeatedly fired in succession down in the village; what the cause was we could not conjecture. I had some fearful forebodings that something more than the sound of a carriage wheel was in the wind. The regulars are coming in good earnest, thought I.

My grandsire sighed, he “smelt the rat.” He immediately turned out the team and repaired homeward. I set off to see what the cause of the commotion was. I found most of the male kind of the people together; soldiers for Boston were in requisition. A dollar deposited upon the drumhead was taken up by someone as soon as placed there and the holder’s name taken, and he enrolled with orders to equip himself as quick as possible. My spirits began to revive at the sight of the money offered; the seeds of courage began to sprout; for, contrary to my knowledge, there was a scattering of them sowed, but they had not as yet germinated; I felt a strong inclination, when I found I had them, to cultivate them. O, thought I, if I were but old enough to put myself forward, I would be the possessor of one dollar, the dangers of war to the contrary notwithstanding; but I durst not put myself up for a soldier for fear of being refused, and that would have quite upset all the courage I had drawn forth.

The men that had engaged “to go to war” went as far as the next town, where they received orders to return, as there was a sufficiency of men already engaged, so that I should have had but a short campaign had I have gone.

This year there were troops raised both for Boston and New York. Some from the back towns were billeted at my grandsire’s; their company and conversation began to warm my courage to such a degree that I resolved at all events to “go a sogering.”² Accordingly, I used to pump my grandsire in a roundabout manner to know how he stood affected respecting it. For a long time he appeared to take but little notice of it. At length, one day I pushed the matter so hard upon him, he was compelled to give me a direct answer, which was that he should never give his consent for me to go into the army unless I had the

² In the wake of Lexington and Concord, patriot leaders in Massachusetts quickly called for troop support from other New England colonies. The Connecticut Assembly responded decisively before the end of April by ordering the formation of six regiments, each to enlist 1,000 soldiers, and added two more in July. The *rage militaire* was on, and in the summer and autumn of 1775, as observed by young Martin, it seemed as if everyone wanted to be a “soger.”

previous consent of my parents. And now I was completely graveled [perplexed]; my parents were too far off to obtain their consent before it would be too late for the present campaign. What was I to do? Why, I must give up the idea, and that was hard; for I was as earnest now to call myself, and be called a soldier, as I had been a year before *not* to be called one. I thought over many things and formed many plans, but they all fell through, and poor disconsolate I was forced to sit down and gnaw my fingernails in silence.

I said but little more about "soldiering" until the troops raised in and near the town in which I resided came to march off for New York. Then I felt bitterly again; I accompanied them as far as the town line, and it was hard parting with them then. Many of my young associates were with them; my heart and soul went with them, but my mortal part must stay behind. By and by they will come swaggering back, thought I, and tell me of all their exploits, all their "hairbreadth 'scapes," and poor Huff will not have a single sentence to advance. O, that was too much to be borne with by me.

The thoughts of the service still haunted me after the troops were gone, and the town clear of them; but what plan to form to get the consent of all, parents and grandparents, that I might procure thereby to myself the (to me then) bewitching name of a soldier, I could not devise. Sometimes I thought I would enlist at all hazards, let the consequences be what they would; then again, I would think how kind my grandparents were to me, and ever had been, my grandsire in particular: I could not bear to hurt their feelings so much. I did sincerely love my grandsire; my grandma'am I did not love so well, and I feared her less. At length a thought struck my mind: Should they affront me grossly, I would make that a plea with my conscience to settle the controversy with. Accordingly, I wished nothing more than to have them, or either of them, give "His Honor" a high affront, that I might thereby form an excuse to engage in the service *without* their consent, leave, or approbation.

It happened that in the early part of the autumn of this year, I was gratified in my wishes; for I thought I had received provocation enough to justify me in engaging in the army during life, little thinking that I was inflicting the punishment on myself that I fancied I was laying on my grandparents for their (as I thought) willful obstinacy. And as this affair was one and the chief cause of my leaving those kind people and their hospitable house, and precipitating myself into an ocean of distress, I will minutely describe the affair.

My grandsire, as I have before observed, often gave me playdays, especially after the spring and fall sowing, when I went where I pleased, a gunning, or fishing, or to whatever recreation took my fancy. "This fall," said the old gentleman to me one day, "come, spring to it, and let us get the winter grain in as soon as possible, and you shall have a play-day after the work is done." Accordingly, I did do the best I could to forward the business, and I believe I gave him satisfaction, for he repeated his promise to me often. Just before we had done sowing, I told him that all my young associates were going to New Haven to commencement this season.³ "Well," said he, "you shall go too, if you choose, and you shall have one of the horses; you shall have your choice of them, and I will give you some pocket money."...

My grandsire had a piece of salt marsh about three miles from home, which he had mowed three or four days before the day arrived which was to make me completely happy, at least for a time. Two days previous he sent me to rake up the hay; I buffeted heat and mosquitoes and got the hay all up; and as that sort of hay is not easily injured by the weather, I thought there was nothing to prevent my promised happiness.

Well, the day arrived. I got up early, did all the little jobs about the place, that my grandsire might have nothing to accuse me of. He had gone out during the morning and did not return till breakfast time. I was waiting with impatience for his coming in, that I might prepare for my excursion, when, lo, he did come—much to my sorrow; for the first words I heard were, "Come, get up the team, I have gotten such a one," naming a neighbor's boy somewhat older than myself, "to go with us and cart home the salt hay." Had thunder and lightning fallen upon the four corners of the house, it would not have struck me with worse feelings than these words of his did. Shame, grief, spite, revenge, all took immediate possession of me. What could I do; go I must, that was certain, there was no remedy; and go I did, but with a full determination that the old gentleman should know that I had feelings of some sort or other, let him think of me as he would.

I, according to his orders, prepared the team, he undertook to act teamster, and I set off before them for the marsh alone that I might

³ Yale College, founded in 1701, was the third oldest institution of higher learning in the colonies. The college held its annual commencement on the second Wednesday of each September. Although the graduation ceremony may have been solemn, much revelry surrounded the occasion, including everything from fireworks displays to town-and-gown fisticuffs between students and the likes of Martin's young friends.

indulge myself in my grief without molestation. The way to the marsh lay about a mile and a half on the highway to the college. I had hardly got into the highway before I was overtaken by a troop of my young mates, all rigged off for commencement, swaggering like nabobs. The first compliment was, "Hallo, where are you going? We thought you was one of the foremost in the party; your grandsire never intended to let you go, and you was a fool to believe him." I did not believe *them*; my grandsire had never deceived me in such circumstances before, and I was willing even then, vexed as I was, to attribute it to forgetfulness or to anything but willfulness. However, I ... considered myself as much injured as though it had been done ever so designedly.

I, however, went to the marsh; my grandsire, team, and boy arrived soon after me. We put a load of hay upon the cart, and, as it was getting rather late in the day, the old gentleman concluded to go home with the team and left the other youngster and me to pole the rest of the hay off the marsh to the upland, as it was dangerous going upon the lower part of it, being in many places soft and miry. He told us to go to some of the fences and cut a pair of sassafras poles, those being light, and have the remainder of the hay in readiness by his return.

And now comes the catastrophe of the play. I concluded now was the time for me to show my spunk; we went up to the upland where was plenty of fruit; I lay down under an apple tree and fell to eating. The other boy ate too, but still urged me to obey my orders; I was resolved to disobey, let the consequences be what they would. However, he by his importunity at length got me down upon the marsh; we poled one cock [a small pile] of hay off the marsh, when we saw the old gentleman coming full drive, Jehu-like.⁴ Down he came, when lo and behold we had gotten one cock of hay only in a condition to be taken upon the cart; what was to be done. To go on to the marsh was dangerous in the extreme; to stop then to pole it off would not do; the time would not allow it.

O, my grandsire was in a woeful passion. I stood aloof. Whose fault was it, he inquired; the blame was quickly laid to my account, and justly too, for I was the only culprit. The old gentleman came at me hammer and tongs with his six-feet cartwhip. Ah, thought I to myself, good legs, do your duty now if ever; I houghed [hoofed] the gravel, or rather the marsh, in good earnest. There were 20 people or more near us at

⁴ Jehu was a king of Israel in the ninth century BC who was known for his furious driving of chariots. See II Kings 9:20.

work; they all suspended their labor to see the race. But I was too light-footed for the old gentleman, and the people on the marsh setting up a laugh, it rather disconcerted him; he, however, chased me about 30 or 40 rods⁵ when he gave over the pursuit and returned. I ran as much further before I dared to look back; but hearing no sound of footsteps behind me, I at last ventured to look over my shoulder and saw him almost back to his team; I followed him in my turn, but not quite so nimble as I went from him. He endeavored to spit a little of his spite upon the other youngster, but he *stepped* up close to him so that he could not use his whip; and then pled his own cause so well that the old gentleman said no more to him.

He then had to venture upon the marsh at all events. I took a rake and raked after the cart, but took especial care to keep out of harm's way till the hay was all upon the cart. I was then called upon to help bind the load; I complied, but I kept on tiptoe all the time, ready to start in case I saw any symptoms of war; but all passed off. We got off the marsh safe and without any hindrance; and it was well for me, after all, that we met with no disaster.

And here ends my Introductory Chapter. If the reader thinks that some passages in it record incidents not altogether to my credit as a boy, I can tell him that I thought at the time I did right, and to tell the truth I have not materially altered my opinion respecting them since. One thing I am certain of and that is, reader, if you had been me, you would have done just as I did. What reason have you then to cavil?

⁵ One rod equals 5.5 yards or 16.5 feet. Throughout his memoir Martin uses the rod as a standard unit for measuring distances. In this situation, he estimated the length of the chase at 165 to 220 yards, or roughly the length of two football fields.