

Chapter X

A Game of Kings

But for a short while the pace of life at “Fort Hellyard”, sometimes known as Fort Haskell, seemed to move a notch slower as the weather got warmer in March, signaling the beginning of the Spring growing-season in southern Virginia. Martin records that pace in his diary entries for the next five days: Sunday, March 19, 1865: “Five days on guard. Acted as Sergeant of the guard. Marched by the band at Dress Parade. Camp inspected by the General. Morning inspection. Light marching order.”

Monday, March 20, 1865: “Warm and pleasant. Was relieved from guard by Sergeant Wagenor; Battalion Drill 7 A.M.; Dress Parade 4 P.M.”

Tuesday, March 21, 1865: “No drill today. Ball on picket. Commenced to rain after dinner.”

Wednesday, March 22, 1865: “John’s father went back to his Regt. Grove Dutton picket. Bought last Day Grant photograph.”

Thursday, March 23, 1865: “Very windy. Looks like some rain. Company Drill. Played checkers with Grant. Kings, 6 games and he beat me.”

Corporal Martin Clark had gotten used to seeing and hearing about Grant. The General’s headquarters were about a mile from

their 76th Regiment bivouac, or camping place, at Culpepper. And he had seen General Grant during the Wilderness battles. And the 76th Regiment had been just ahead of Army Headquarters as they passed over the pontoon bridge at the James River. Recently, Gen. Grant's headquarters had also been at City Point, only about 7 miles away from Martin's post at Fort Haskell.

But even with that, Martin was astounded with the orders he received when he got back from their Company drill; he was advised by a courier on horseback to report immediately back to Gen Hartranft's Division headquarters tent, where General Grant wanted to talk to him.

Martin was aghast. He had never met a General before. He was hot and sweaty from marching, but the courier said "now" when Martin had asked. Least of all, he had never ever expected to meet General Grant. Maybe he had done something wrong. Anyway he wouldn't know what to say. But he followed the courier on foot at double-time to the large tent where he had delivered the Reb prisoner just about a week earlier.

Reaching the General's tent, the courier dropped down off his saddle, walked to the tent entrance, then saluted the General's Orderly there, and said to him, "This is Corporal Martin Clark reporting as ordered, Sir." The courier then saluted again, did an about-face away from the tent, and left the area, leaving Martin staring at the courier and behind him, in the tent, a short, heavily built, uniformed Lieutenant-General of about medium height.

Sensing his discomfort, General Grant quickly said, "Sit down, Corporal, you haven't done anything wrong. General Hartranft has just told me that you brought in the Reb Colonel the other night, and I wanted to meet you. Do you play checkers? Good. How about a game of Kings? We both need to relax a bit. Like a glass of cider here?" Haven't you heard that I always spend a lot of time talking to my soldiers out in the field like this? Well, I do."

As he handed Martin his checkers, General Grant, who seemed in a good mood, continued to ramble on as Martin just sat and stared at him, dumbfounded. Martin doubted that he could even say anything at all at this point, and wasn't about to try anyway.

"You think I'm wasting my time, soldier, talking to the troops like this? Well, I'm not as dumb as all that. No, sir. What do you think an Army runs on anyway, Martin?" At that, Martin almost fell off his folding wooden chair. General Grant even knew his first name!

Seeming to be just warming up, Gen. Grant continued, "You think we run on strategies, or the officer's brilliant execution of strategy. No, if that's what we ran on, we'd have taken Petersburg on June 16th, last year. We all knew that Petersburg could not be defended by the Rebs at that point. We could have walked into Petersburg if our plans had worked. But plans didn't work, because the soldiers were all too exhausted and beaten up from fighting in the Wilderness for 6 weeks. Even our two best

generals, Smith and Hancock, were in so much pain they couldn't concentrate."

"No sir, Corporal, an army runs on good soldiers like you. Without healthy, rested soldiers, an Army won't fight either, like at Petersburg. And that's not all, an army in a tough fight won't move at all unless they are motivated to fight. They will just sit and watch and wait." Continuing, he said, "An Army has to want to fight, or it won't move. The reason that I'm a General is that I know that, the others don't. No sir, I'm not wasting my time talking to soldiers like you, I'm learning about my soldiers, and that's why we're going to whip those Johnnie Rebs. For all Lee's fancy ideas, he doesn't know his troops like I know mine. Words, bullets, and guns don't win wars! Soldiers do! That's the truth, soldier, you wait and see!"

Meantime, Grant had finished setting up all checkers on the board, and had proceeded to move his first row checker on the right forward and to its right to the corner of the board. Martin looked hard at the board, and then at General Grant. It looked as though General Grant meant to win at checkers, all right.

As Martin decided to counter with the same move on his side, toward the left side of the board, General Grant simultaneously said, "Tell me about that Reb Colonel, what you thought of him? Think he was telling the truth, or was he deserting for some other reason?"

Not having thought about the possibility very much, Martin replied, "I tried to check that out, General, but as far as I could tell, he seemed to know the location of West Point, and to

actually have a girl-friend up north, so he seemed legitimate as far as I could tell. Don't really know for sure, General."

"Well, from your position on the front line there at Fort Haskell, do you think that Reb Colonel's description of the build-up around Colquitt's Salient is accurate? Do you see any incoming new troops over there? Think the Reb's might be getting ready to come after us from over there?"

This last question really startled Martin, because he was afraid that might mean that the Commanding General might actually know what his Union skirmishers were doing on the front lines, and that they were actually talking with their Reb counterparts. But, glancing over at the peering General Grant, Martin couldn't seem to tell anything about what he was thinking or actually knew, so hopefully he wouldn't know about what Martin had been doing with the others.

So Martin just answered, "Could be, General, there's a lot of moving about of horses, wagons, and troops over there every day; we can see and hear that."

After a few minutes, since both players had been making moves on the board all along as they talked, Clark realized that General Grant had been able to get three of his pieces "kinged" already, and was moving them to the center of the board. "Maybe I better concentrate more on my players, General, because it seems some of my checker-men are in a bit of trouble."

He felt a bit uncomfortable about trying to draw conclusions about the Reb Colonel, and was anxious to get off that subject. So

it went for another 5 games. No doubt, Martin thought, General Grant might also like to talk to his troops this way, so he could at the same time, beat them at checkers.

After closing out his sixth win, Gen. Grant rose from his chair and said, “Pleasure to meet you, Soldier, you play a nice game of checkers! Just do me one favor”, he winked, “will you? Don’t ever tell anybody about this, either now, or after the war is over. We all like to have our secrets, you know. You’re dismissed; you can go back to your tent. Good work on bringing in that Reb! ” And that was the end of the biggest single day’s event in Martin Clark’s entire life, he felt.

But he was so amazed at General Grant, that he never told anybody about it. Amazingly, he could even relate to the General—thought he might make a good carpenter, perhaps, or maybe even a good army Corporal, like himself.