

CHAPTER VIII

First Raid on East Tennessee

1863: Known generally as Sanders Raid, Friday, 19th June. Early this morning, being casually on a visit to my daughter, Henrietta Rutledge Lenoir, at Lenoir, Roane County, Tennessee I was awaked by William Lenoir, Esquire, knocking at my room door and informing me that the enemy late last night was at Kingston, about twelve miles off. Dressing myself and coming downstairs, I found my daughter preparing to accompany me as far as Concord on my return to Knoxville. I dissuaded her from it, mentioning to her the intelligence I had just received that the Yankees were at Kingston and might soon be there on their way to Knoxville, which was evidently their point of attack. Acting under this impression, I did not wait for the passenger train, but a freight train coming in view soon after, I got on it and, arriving at Knoxville, saw on the platform Major Richard C. Jackson, the then Superintendent of the E. T. & G. R. R. I went near to him and told him what news I bore. Just then a telegram from Loudon, via Augusta, Lynchburg, etc. (our own wires being cut), informed us that the enemy was between Kingston and Loudon, and would probably attack Knoxville within twenty-four hours. I immediately determined to remove the state and Confederate assets in my hands beyond their reach. I went into town, found Dr. Strong, my cashier, asked him to empty the vault (our specie was in Atlanta) of all its contents, box them up, and have all ready for the eastern train of the Virginia Road. I found my son, McKnitt, of W. C. Kain's Artillery, stationed there to assist Dr. Strong in packing up our assets—to send word also out to my family at Mecklenburg what would detain me from home that evening. After a short conference with some of the directors, I hurried down to the Bell House, the headquarters of the then commanding general. I inquired for him. He had not yet come to his office, but entered it soon after hurriedly and excited. I applied for transportation, my passports, and a guard to protect my treasures. He directed his adjutants to give them at once, observing at the same time that I could not get out of Knoxville

too soon. He authorized me to select my own guard. I replied: "As you will be attacked today or tomorrow, I am unwilling to diminish the force necessary for the defense of the place." I therefore selected from among the noncombatants, Colonel Jacob Miller, of Hawkins County, and president of our Rogersville branch, but then casually at Knoxville; Honorable West H. Humphreys of Confederate States court, Reverend Archibald Alexander Doak and one or two other gentlemen of known character. I gave them orders not to be seen about the bank that day. Outside of the bank and its officers, no one knew my intentions. For I knew there were citizens around me, unfriendly to the South, and willing to betray our cause. The train was to start eastward at three P.M., and an army wagon or ambulance was to be in our back lot at three to receive our boxes. To my son, McKnitt, this duty had been assigned. At about ten A.M., I was surprised to see the general commanding, escorted by his lifeguard under Captain Wallace, pass by the bank where I was—en route, as I learned afterwards, to Clinch River sixteen miles from town.

Except the brave citizens of Knoxville itself and a few from the country, Captain Kain's Artillery Company and a small force under Colonel J. J. Finley from Florida, there was no force adequate to the defense of the metropolis of East Tennessee. This small volunteer force though was put under drill by Captain Pleasant M. McClung, and the whole under command of the gallant Colonel R. C. Trigg of Virginia.

There had been some unexpected delay in starting the train. A little before sundown, the last of my boxes was contrived aboard, and I and my guard with it. Someone rode up and said aloud that the advance of the enemy was then at Armstrong's, about two miles below town. The whistle sounded, but for want of steam did not get far and backed a little. During this short stoppage some horsemen started off at full speed north over the commons, and disappeared at once in the adjoining woods. I was afterwards told that one of them was _____ Coker, and that he had been seen all day hanging about the depot and the train I was on, and was evidently in communication with a part of the enemy's cavalry then encamping in the neighborhood of Colonel Scott's old mill. This is probably true, as I heard after my return to Knoxville that just after our train passed the house of Hannibal Love, these horsemen arrived there—disappointed that they failed to intercept or prevent our escape with my assets and those of others entrusted to my care and left in our vault. The train went rapidly to McMillan's Station, ten or twelve miles from

Knoxville, where it met the descending train. While taking in a supply of water and wood, Judge Humphreys and myself went aboard the Virginia train. I inquired what troops these were and who was the commanding officer? They replied they were part of the regiment of Colonel Trigg of Virginia who was now in Knoxville. I then inquired who here was in chief command? An officer came forward whom I informed that twenty-four hours before the enemy was within thirty miles from Knoxville, and will meet you there. Judge Humphreys, when the officer expressed doubts on the subject, told him who I was, and that I was then taking away to a place of safety the Confederate and state assets as I believed the place would be assaulted at once. The officer gave orders to the men to load. (On another page what followed with these soldiers will be again mentioned.) I took my assets to Abingdon, Virginia (as I could find no vault in Jonesboro or Greeneville), and, leaving them in the custody of the Confederate States depository there, I took the down train to Knoxville. Colonel W. P. Sanders, after his repulse at Knoxville, had passed rapidly up the country destroying the bridges and burning the track at several places as far up as Mossy Creek, when he crossed the Holston and fell back into Kentucky. Our returning train could get no further than a little east of New Market. The country was full of disaffected citizens, seduced from their hiding places by the presence of an armed Federal force. Many of them spoke out in favor of the old flag: others affected neutrality, and seemed relieved at the absence of the invaders. I and one of my guards walked several miles down the railroad, tried everywhere to hire or borrow means of conveyance home. At last someone, more loyal to the South than his neighbors, was also bold enough to lend me two horses, and I, in passing from Strawberry Plains with Mr. Doak, saw and conversed with several men of well-known Union proclivities, and we were neither insulted nor molested. Some of them asked whose horses we were riding. I told them who had been so kind as to lend them to us. I returned them to the owner and heard afterwards that they were stolen.

As I approached my own residence, several of my neighbors told me they had seen my wife and daughters pass their houses a day or two before in carriages and wagons and some Negroes and then passing again homeward. On arriving at home, I learned from my family that the day I left on the train for Abingdon a military court (not a court martial)

of the Confederate States had come out there to avoid the invaders, and that next morning, hearing the cannonading at Knoxville, they wished to put further space than four miles between themselves and danger, advised and insisted on Mrs. Ramsey to put her daughters and her most valuable effects into the carriage and buggy and an ox wagon and escape in the direction of McBee's ferry, and there take the train eastward. At first she refused to do so. They told her that the enemy would take and hold the city, and that she would be far safer and less annoyed on the way than at home. Their importunity prevailed over her own good judgment, and the cavalcade had progressed into the very jaws of death or captivity when it met a motley group of scared women and frightened children fleeing from the fight at Fort _____ and the burning of the village and the bridge at Strawberry Plains. The firing was then heard, and soon after the smoke of the incendiaries admonished my ladies that they had gone far enough in that direction, and they turned their faces homeward.

In this confusion, the military court, the advisers and at the time the natural guardians, protectors, and guides of my family, disappeared and I never heard from them afterwards. Not so with the pious, and venerable, and reverend, Methodist Divine Reverend _____ Cross, D.D. of Nashville, Tennessee. He had become a guest at Mecklenburg the day before this Hegira to the Plains. He stayed close by my family, was attentive to their wants and comfort, cheered them in their exposures, and acted as the gentleman—the Christian and the chaplain. My brave wife—heroic as Julius Caesar, and her three daughters, also—never really consented to go away from their home, and only yielded to what she considered military necessity, and to proper and becoming subordination to authority. The exposure and fatigue of the journey of twenty-six miles in hot weather, and some trivial losses at home, were all disregarded when I unexpectedly arrived safe and sound with my good guard and chaplain, Reverend A. A. Doak, at my home.

The next day early, I reported to the board at the bank what I had done, and also wrote more fully than I had time to do at Abingdon in a second letter to Mr. Memminger. The directors approved of my conduct and the secretary expressed his official approbation and communicated to me the thanks of the government for the zeal, energy, and vigilance I had showed for the public interest.

After I had got on the freight train early that morning, as mentioned on a preceding page, my daughter, Mrs. Lenoir, after bidding me an affectionate adieu, walked through the passage to the back door and looking along the road towards Kingston saw a cavalry force riding rapidly towards her gate. Supposing them to be Confederates retiring before the invading Federal forces she inquired artlessly: "Are you escaping from the Yankees?" One of them, perhaps Colonel R. K. Byrd, who knew her, replied, "We are the Yankees themselves." They then rode forward opposite to the house, dismounted and entered the store and post office across the great road. The safe had been unlocked that morning and the key was still in its door. Knowing where the money was kept, she walked deliberately across to the store. Wearing a garden or sunbonnet she was not recognized by many of the horsemen as Mrs. Lenoir, and was allowed to pass along among them unknown and unmolested. She went directly to the safe, took out of its open shelves large parcels of money, placed them in the bend of her arm, and taking several hanks of yarn from an open bale of it lying beside and near to the safe she quietly and deliberately passed out of the store—into and through the house and deposited the unseen treasure under a hedge in the garden. She was neither insulted nor otherwise molested. I have always believed that Colonel Sanders was a Southerner and a gentleman, and that Colonel Byrd was one also. Though the atrocities committed the same day at Dr. Baker's and higher up the country a day or two afterwards gave a different complexion to the character and conduct of these officers, still at Lenoir's their behavior was soldierly delicate, politic and gentlemanly. It savored of honor, chivalry, and elevated virtue that once distinguished the profession of arms. Mrs. Lenoir always spoke candidly of the good behavior and honorable conduct of these raiders, and of some others who afterwards made their headquarters at her house and acted as gentlemen, while she never failed to inflict upon those who acted differently her heaviest censure and sternest rebuke.

I may add here a short account of Colonel W. F. Sanders assault on Knoxville, June 20th, 1863, as I received it from others—not being, as already stated, present at the affair.

The evening I left, some of Sanders' cavalry bivouacked near to Knoxville and some small arms were, during the night, discharged into the

suburbs without effect. Next morning their horsemen were seen around town and especially on its north side beyond the depots. At _____ A.M., they erected a battery and planted some small cannon and commenced firing on the town. I have already said that General Simon Bolivar Buckner had, on the A.M. of the nineteenth, gone with his lifeguard in the direction of Clinch, and that Kain's Artillery, parts of two regiments from Florida under command of Colonel Finley and the local militia and volunteers of Knoxville constituted the whole Confederate force. The Federal batteries were advancing nearer to our lines, and giving protection to their cavalry behind them in the woods—unseen from Summit Hill, and their real number unknown. Their bugles indicated a considerable force as ready to make an immediate assault. The regiment from Virginia which I had met and spoken to the evening before on the train at McMillan's had, in the meantime, arrived at the fair grounds near town and reported to their commander, Colonel Trigg, now within the city and in chief command. Early in the day, Colonel Trigg inquired for someone most familiar with the localities between the fair grounds and the east end of Knoxville; as by that route he wished his regiment to approach the town and join the forces in it. Someone mentioned my son, J. G. McKnitt Ramsey of the artillery stationed then on the heights of East Knoxville, and R. Jarnagin, also, as being very familiar with the grounds. To him Colonel Trigg assigned the duty of bringing in to his aid the regiment at the fair grounds. McKnitt, in passing out of our lines on this duty, went by the battery on the height and told the artillerist not to fire on the Virginia troops when coming in view, under the belief they were the enemy's advance to the assault. The officer at the battery had left his position for a minute, without giving the precautionary notice to his substitute not to fire. At the first sight of the Virginia regiment, as it appeared coming out of the woods on the hill beyond General Mabry's house, the artillerist, mistaking it for the enemy's advance, was in the act of applying the match to his gun when he was told in a loud voice by the Captain "not to fire—it was Trigg's regiment." If that gun had been fired, loaded as it was with grape, confusion must have ensued, and Knoxville might have been captured and destroyed. Fortunately, the arrival of this reinforcement was seen and noticed by the assailants. Their assault was feeble and badly executed. Their bugles sounded a retreat, and they were soon in a rapid march against the defenseless post of Strawberry Plains. Little harm was done at Knoxville. The enemy did not even enter

into any part of the town proper, but paraded in the woods adjoining it on the north. We lost one gallant officer, Captain Pleasant Miller McClung. He was fearlessly exposing his person in going from point to point wherever the danger was greatest, encouraging the men to repel assault whenever attempted most seriously. It was said he fell by the last cannon ball fired before the enemy withdrew. He was a brave man, a patriot, and an excellent citizen.

A few of the enemy's shot took effect in the houses, fences, etc., of the town. A ball of grape struck the side of Judge Humphreys' window. His room and office were in the upper story of the branch Bank of Tennessee. A spent cannonball entered the coal house of the bank but no other injury was inflicted.

So soon as the injuries to the railroad between Knoxville and Morristown were repaired, my cashier, Dr. Strong, and my son McKnitt went to Abingdon and brought back safely to Knoxville both the state and Confederate assets.