Thomas Lafayette Rosser

BY MAJOR JOSEPH MILLS HANSON, F.A. RESERVE

SOME men seem born to lead lives marked by swift changes of fortune and environment, whether as the result of their own strivings or through mere stress of circumstances. In the case of Thomas Lafayette Rosser, personality and circumstance both tended to that end. Dramatic successes and reverses figured in his youth and his later maturity as prominently as they did during his four tempestuous years in the Confederate Army. From the easy life of an ante-bellum plantation, he went to the austerities of the frontier. He rose in the stern school of warfare to the rank of major general; he sank to the estate of a penniless lawyer, and then to that of a day laborer, only to fight his way up again, making of himself one of the most distinguished engineers of his day, and wearing once more the uniform of a general. A fearless fighter for principles, but no bigot; often beaten down, but never defeated, he was an ideal exponent of old-fashioned American pluck and perseverance, with a happy faculty for shaping difficulties, fears and prejudices to his own ends.

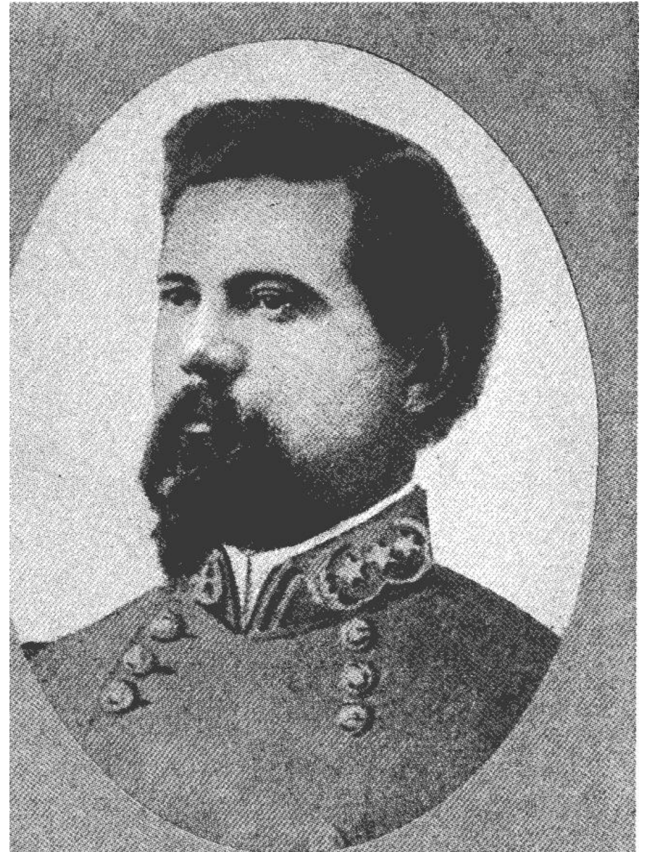
Any inclination which may have existed within him to become a mere self-complacent aristocrat was overcome almost in childhood by sudden changes of prospect and environment quite unusual for a boy of his period and section of the country. Born on a farm near Charlottesville, Virginia, October 15, 1836, from his father, John Rosser, he inherited the blood of French Huguenots of an early colonial day, and from his mother, Martha Melvina (Johnson) Rosser, strains of English and Scandinavian ancestry. These were sturdy, pioneering stocks, seldom inclined to brook much dogmatism or oppression.

Having suffered financial reverses in Virginia, in 1849 John Rosser left there for Texas, with his wife and seven children, of whom Tom, then thirteen, was the second child and the eldest son. In the pine timber country of Panola County, beside the Sabine River, they settled on a farm of 640 acres. Except politically, no change of scene could have been much more radical. In the Old Dominion, life had run in methodical and well-established ways. But now the family came from them to a frontier state whose population of barely zoo,000 was scattered over a vast territory limited on the west and north by the hunting grounds of hostile Indian tribes.

By the aid of a few slaves and with his own powerful arms and those of young Tom, who did as heavy a day's work as the best of them, John Rosser cleared the land, and built a commodious house, a cotton gin, a mill for grinding corn meal, and other buildings. An earthquake would hardly have disturbed those solid structures. Their material was wrought from the trees of the virgin forest; no match sticks, but timbers fit for ships' masts, sixty feet long, axe-hewn, and squared a foot thick from end to end. The roofs were of boards, riven with a frow from the raw logs, dipped in tar, and anchored to the rafters with wooden pegs.

Its surroundings were in keeping with the primitive strength of the homestead. Wild animals abounded in the forests. People in the region were more than once attacked by panthers, and these "varmints," as well as bears and deer, were shot by Tom and his father within a few hundred yards of the house. Once an alligator came up out of the sluggish waters of the Sabine and killed one of their negro boys. It was no easy task for John Rosser to make a living for his big family. His only staple crops were cotton and corn, and the thin soil made poor cotton and worse corn. After the former had been ginned, it was usually Tom who hauled what there was of it to market, at Shreveport, Louisiana, forty miles away.

But Mr. Rosser was firmly resolved to educate his children, though he had enjoyed only a meager schooling himself. When Tom was sixteen, his father scraped together the money to send him to the nearest school of any standing, at Mount Enterprise, in the next county. Tom attended it for four years, and had then about decided to make a life work of school teaching, when the



General Thomas L. Rosser, C.S.A.

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Congressman from his district changed his destiny by giving him an appointment to the United States Military Academy.

No doubt, as he first looked over West Point, the lanky young Texan, twenty years of age and six feet, two inches tall, felt awkward and ill at ease among the refinements of a civilization to which he had grown unaccustomed. To his dismay, he also learned that, owing to some misunderstanding he had arrived six months before he was expected, and that much earlier than he could enter. It was out of the question, to return to Texas, so he settled himself at Buttermilk Falls and spent the time in study. It was a wise precaution, for without the additional knowledge gained in those months he would probably have failed in his entrance examinations.

But he succeeded in passing, and then for five years in remaining a cadet. During those long seasons of undergraduate joys and tribulations, his happiest hours were the ones spent with his classmate and roommate, John Pelham, of Alabama, and with certain other congenial spirits in the class of '61, especially George Armstrong Custer, of Michigan. In their dormitory, Custer and James P. Parker, of Missouri, occupied the room next to that of Rosser and Pelham. Three of these four were to send their names down in history. It is said that Pelham and Custer were among the handsomest young men in the cadet corps, in which Custer, owing to his delicately cut features, was popularly known as "Fanny," a nickname by which his school mates referred to him long after he became famous. Rosser was such a big fellow that in the ranks of his company he stood in the first squad, to which Pelham also belonged. But Pelham was a little shorter, and there was a danger that the two would be separated at formations when a happy thought occurred to Rosser. He put padding between Pelham's socks and shoes and increased his height just enough to keep him in the same file.

But such harmonious relations did not exist between Rosser and all of his fellows. One night during his plebe summer camp, some upper classmen slipped a rope over his leg as he lay asleep in his tent and dragged him over the parade ground. One of them, a cadet officer, kicked him. Rosser recognized the bully and next morning forced him to fight. The Texan thus became technically guilty of striking a superior officer (which he did, hard and often) and he spent the ensuing six months in the guard-house.

But with the coming of spring in 1861, more serious issues had to be met. As a champion of Southern principles, Rosser felt himself obliged to resign and go South but a few weeks before he might have received the diploma for which he had worked so hard. It was a bitter experience to part with his old schoolmates of opposite opinions. Although he and Pelham were on the same side and destined to see much service together, Custer adhered to the Union. It was one of the tragedies of those dark days that such devoted friends as he and Rosser were to meet in many bloody conflicts.

Making his way as best he could to Montgomery, Alabama, where the troops of the infant Confederacy were gathering and beginning their training with youthful enthusiasm, Rosser soon found himself assigned as a first lieutenant to the Washington Artillery, a famous old organization of New Orleans. With it he went before long into his first battle, at Bull Run, where he commanded the Second Battery, with two classmates, James Dearing and John J. Garnett, as lieutenants. Without a chance to do much fighting he conducted himself intelligently at Blackburn's Ford and on other parts of the field, and Jeb Stuart, the rising cavalryman, marked him with an appraising eye.

The panting remains of the Union Army having fled back to Washington from the Bull Run rout, their surprised opponents followed, to watch with interest during the ensuing months, from convenient hilltops and crossroads south of the Potomac, the elaborate processes by which General McClellan transformed his amateur army into a real fighting machine. This commander experimented hopefully with every innovation calculated to aid his troops, and he was the first general to put into the field a well organized service of observation balloons.

But if McClellan thus became a. pioneer of warfare in the air, Rosser the juvenile artillerist, was the first successful exponent of antiaircraft defense. Serving with Stuart's ever inquisitive cavalry brigade, he one day saw the Federals run up a balloon close behind their front line. Here was a chance for sport. Galloping one of his guns forward as far as possible, he opened fire. The first shot arched aloft and fell short. So he dug a hole for his gun trail and increased the elevation. The second shot, beautifully aimed, hit the observer's basket and cut some of the ropes. The balloon was hauled down in haste, and when used thereafter it always went up well behind the line.

For this feat, it is said, Rosser received his promotion captain, in which grade he commanded his battery at the siege of Yorktown and until the fight at Mechanicsville on May 24, 1862. Here he received a severe wound in the arm, the first of several bad hurts that he got during the war. A mere wound, however, could not long hold him inactive; he was back, with a promotion to lieutenant colonel of artillery, before the Seven Days battles began. But Jeb Stuart had not been watching him for nothing. The cavalry chief immediately obtained him a commission as colonel of cavalry and put him in command of the 5th Virginia Regiment. He took it during the fighting before Richmond and remained at its head for fifteen months.

The story of Rosser's career from this time would be the history of the cavalry corps, Army of Northern Virginia, for he had an important part in all of its activities, except when he was recovering from wounds. "A fine artillerist as well as bold Cavalier," rhetorical Stuart once

called him, and, indeed, by his brilliant utilization of both arms he was able to multiply results on many fields. Fertile in expedients, tireless and daring as Stuart himself, he was as quick to pounce on a quarry as one of the panthers of his old Texas pine barrens. His first fight after the Seven Days was typical.

Lee, moving north from Richmond in early August, was sparring with Pope in front of Washington, hopeful of finding a chance to beat him before McClellan could come up from the Peninsula. Along the upper Rappahannock, Stuart engaged the attention of Pope's right wing while Jackson swung past behind him to Thoroughfare Gap, on the dazzling flank march which ended at Manassas Junction. Playing Stuart's game, at dawn, August 21, Rosser broke across Beverly ford, opposite the Union center, captured the outposts with their arms stacked and with cavalry and horse guns held the position all day, completely mystifying Pope, who prepared to resist a general attack on his river line. But next morning Rosser, with the rest of Stuart's division, was twenty-five miles away. Far up river they crossed again and marched to Warrenton, well beyond the Union right. Stray pickets were scooped up, and the enemy was still ignorant of the whereabouts of Stuart when the latter started with 1,500 men for Pope's headquarters at Catlett's Station, ten miles east of the railroad to Washington, with Rosser and the 5th Virginia in the van.

Darkness fell while they were still miles from Catlett's, and with it began a terrific thunderstorm, drenching the men to the skin and warning Stuart that the streams behind him would be swimming deep before he could return. But presently the column approached the station, the pickets, through Rosser's uncanny second sight, being found and overwhelmed without a sound. Before the enemy knew they were there, Stuart's men were charging through the camps. A party surrounded and took Pope's headquarters, but the Federal chief, to their chagrin, was not there. However, stumbling about through sheets of rain laced with rifle flashes and forks of lightning, they gathered in three hundred prisoners, among them Pope's field quartermaster, and took the general's dispatch book, his spare horses and equipment, money chests, and personal baggage, including his dress uniform. This last was subsequently displayed, amid much hilarity, in a Broad Street show widow in Richmond.

Then the raiders took the back track and soon after day were once more safely across the Rappahannock. Perhaps then some of them rested. But not Rosser. The enemy followed hotly to Waterloo bridge, and Stuart sent his Texas colonel back with a hundred sharpshooters to hold the structure intact. He held it, all day and all night, against determined attacks of infantry supported by artillery, and finally turned it over safely to a regiment of infantry sent to relieve him.

So it went with Rosser, always, everywhere. At second Bull Run his regiment, alone, covered Jackson's right flank throughout the first day's battle, and on the last day he raided Manassas Junction for the second time, capturing prisoners, ambulances, and quantities of medical stores and arms. In the Antietam campaign he held Fox's Gap for some time against several brigades of Union infantry, and throughout the long series of hot cavalry engagements from the Potomac to the Rapidan in the autumn he played a conspicuous part, often fighting shoulder to shoulder with "the gallant Pelham," now famous as the chief of the Stuart Horse Artillery. On March 17, 1863, he was present at the cavalry engagement at Kelly's Ford, the first of the year's campaign, which has a mournful distinction because there, in front of the stone wall in Wheatley's field, Pelham was killed. Not far away, and at almost the same moment, Colonel Rosser was struck down by his second severe wound. Though it kept him incapacitated for weeks, undoubtedly his physical wound was less painful to him than the death of his beloved friend.

But a joy now came to him to alleviate his sorrow. Even in the stress of war he had met and won a charming daughter of Virginia, Betty Barbara Winston, of Hanover Court House. If Pelham had lived he would doubtless have been close to the bridegroom's side when they were married, on May 28, 1863. The short-lived Confederacy perhaps never saw a more brilliant military wedding, for it brought together most of the notable officers from Fredericksburg to the Hazel River. General Stuart himself, red-bearded, bubbling with good spirits, was there with his wife, daughter of a Federal general; among the groomsmen were Rosser's brigade commander, General Fitzhugh Lee, and his classmates, Colonel Pierce Young and Major Jimmy Dearing. And mingling with the guests, suave, agreeable, was an officer whom the bride took for a friend of the groom; the groom, for a friend of the bride. In fact, he was a Union spy; Rosser met him again, years afterwards, in Minnesota. Music, laughter, soft Southern speech; and in the velvet dusk the summer stars looking down on gray frock coats and white gowns, side by side beneath the trees where the air was heavy with the scent of old-fashioned garden flowers. Then, all too soon, back to the smoky camp-fires, the sound of booming guns. But for Mrs. Betty Barbara Rosser they held no terrors. To the camps she went with her husband, to live as the soldiers lived through most of the next two years.

Only twelve days after the wedding came the battle of Brandy Station, greatest of all American cavalry combats, and then the campaign into Pennsylvania. Rosser, at the front in every fight where Fitz Lee's brigade was engaged, came through uninjured, with added laurels. Stuart always praised him officially. "The cavalry under Colonel Rosser played an important part"; "a brilliant charge as foragers was made by Colonel Rosser's cavalry"; "my thanks are due to Colonel Rosser for the zeal and ability displayed." Such phrases are frequent in his reports. Yet all was not right between them. Following Gettysburg, in a letter to his wife Rosser criticized the handling of the

cavalry, declaring that he might go back to the artillery, even at his old rank of lieutenant colonel. Writing for publication years after the war, there was a sting in his comments on Stuart which brought hot rejoinders from some of the latter's friends. Rosser sensed in his chief a favoritism toward the older officers and probably resented his own delayed, though richly deserved, promotion to brigadier. He got his step in September, 1863, taking the staunch old "Laurel Brigade," of Turner Ashby and "Grumble" Jones. But the mischief between him and Stuart had been done. They were two strong men, each with his foibles as well as his virtues; that they sometimes differed radically in opinion was not surprising.

With Gettysburg, Custer entered upon the scene, in anything but a friendly part. The picturesque Michigander, with his yellow curls, velveteen uniform, and red necktie, after serving a long apprenticeship as a staff captain, had been accurately measured by General Pleasonton and jumped four grades to the command of a cavalry brigade. His troops and Rosser's had clashed at once, at Gettysburg; from that time forward on nearly every field they seemed to come into contact like magnet and steel. But there was a chivalric glamor as of ancient days in their battlefield rivalry, for deep in their hearts still burned affectionate admiration for each other. They were as thoroughgoing public enemies, and as understanding personal friends, as Turenne and Condé.

The first clean-cut encounter between them resulted in Rosser's carrying off the honors. In the autumn of 1863, General Lee undertook his Bristoe maneuver toward Washington. When Meade, by his prompt movements, had thwarted it, and the Confederate Army was retiring once more to the Rapidan, General Stuart one day in October undertook to lead Kilpatrick's division, which included Custer's brigade, into a trap near Buckland Mills. With Hampton's division he retreated down the Warrenton pike, Kilpatrick following ardently, while Fitz Lee's division lay off the Union left in the woods, and at the proper moment jumped out at the enemy's flank. Hampton, on hearing Lee's guns, turned and hurled his three brigades at the head of Kilpatrick's column, Rosser charging up the north side of the pike.

The combination would have worked perfectly, had not Custer's brigade, bringing up the rear, withstood the stampede of the routed Union van in a galloping getaway for five miles. Even as it was, Rosser smashed in Custer's right and captured all the Union transport, including Custer's headquarters wagons and baggage. The Confederates derisively called the affair, "Buckland Races." The dashing Michigan cavalryman had to confess that he had lost this heat, and await, with what patience he could, the chance to run another with Tom Rosser.

When the battles of the Wilderness campaign began in the spring of 1864—battles which were to hold the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia in practically continuous struggle for almost a year—Rosser found himself with his brigade on the right of the Confederate Army south of the Rapidan, near the Orange Plank Road. Here, on May 5, operating on the outer flank of A. P. Hill's corps, he did notable work in driving back Wilson's cavalry division and temporarily protecting the ground over which Hill desired to extend his line.

Three days later he performed a still more signal service. General Grant, having on May 7 begun to move by his left flank in the direction of Richmond, ordered his leading corps, under Warren, to march on Spotsylvania Court House, which was the junction point of several important roads. He instructed Wilson's cavalry division to seize the courthouse in advance of the infantry, thus cutting Lee's direct route to Richmond. Wilson moved down the Fredericksburg road toward Spotsylvania but before reaching there encountered Rosser's brigade, which fought so stubbornly that the Union advance was seriously delayed. Eventually he forced Rosser back and got possession of the courthouse, but held it for only two hours. Long before any Union infantry could reach and support him, Fitzhugh Lee's division came up to Rosser's assistance, Wilson was driven out, and the Confederates secured the coveted point. Had they not done so, it would have been impossible for Anderson's infantry to have deployed northwest of the courthouse and stopped Warren's corps, as it did; Lee would have been obliged to move farther south, and the battle of Spotsylvania would not have been fought.

In the cavalry fighting incident to the battle of Cold Harbor, General R. E. Lee himself, in one of his dispatches to Richmond, reported that Rosser's brigade "fell upon the rear of the enemy's cavalry" near Hanover Court House, on the Confederate left flank, "and charged down the road toward Ashland, bearing everything before him."

A few days afterwards he again collided with his perennial rival, Custer. On June 5th Sheridan set out from the rear of the Union Army at Cold Harbor with two divisions, of which Torbert's included Custer's brigade, under orders to proceed west to Gordonsville, break up the Virginia Central and Fredericksburg Railroads, and then move to Charlottesville and join General Hunter, coming from the Shenandoah Valley. All went well until Sheridan got within a short distance of Trevilian Station, ten miles from Gordonsville, at dawn of June 11. Here Torbert, less Custer's brigade, encountered Butler's South Carolina brigade, of Wade Hampton's division, across his road, and in sharp fighting pushed the Confederates back toward the station.

Custer had been sent to the left to strike the Virginia Central near Louisa Court House and thence move westward toward Trevilian. He did so, and presently coming up behind Butler, charged into the rear of the South Carolinians, spreading confusion and gathering in a large miscellaneous assortment of pack mules, ambulances, and wagons, together with 350 prisoners, all of which he sent

to the rear. Butler, outflanked, abandoned Trevilian in haste and fell back westward, Custer following and pressing him vigorously. However, at this juncture a mass of gray horsemen, formed in column of squadrons and rolling the dust up in clouds, suddenly appeared on the right of Butler's hard-pressed line. It was Rosser. To quote General Butler, he "thundered down the Gordonsville road, charged and scattered Custer's forces, recaptured what the latter had taken and besides got possession of Custer's headquarters ambulances and a number of his horses and men." The score now stood two to nothing, and Custer still had to await his satisfaction.

Late in the afternoon of that noisy day of charges and counter-charges, Rosser was severely wounded in the leg and had to leave the field, taking no part in the battle of the next day, which resulted in Sheridan relinquishing his effort to reach Gordonsville and Charlottesville and rejoining Grant's forces before Richmond and Petersburg. General Rosser was obliged to spend several weeks in recovering from his wound but was back with the army in time to participate in the "cattle raid," while Grant was before Petersburg, and late in September started for the Shenandoah Valley with other reenforcements for General Early's army, which had suffered heavy defeats at Winchester and Fisher's Hill.

General Lee sent a dispatch to Early, advising the latter to redistribute his cavalry, which had been shaken by its reverses, giving Rosser enough troops to raise his command to a division and making other changes. Rosser's brigade reached Early on October 5, and the very next day was engaged with part of Custer's cavalry at Brock's Gap in Little North Mountain. On the same date General Sheridan, having learned that Early had been largely reenforced, began retiring northward toward Winchester, sweeping the Valley so clean of provender as he went that, as he himself declared, "a crow could not fly across it without carrying a knapsack."

Custer, by this time, as well as Rosser, was commanding a division, with which he covered the withdrawal of the Union Army and completed the destruction of food and forage along the so-called "Back Road," several miles west of the Valley pike, while Merritt's division performed those functions along the pike itself. On the part of the Confederates, Lomax's cavalry division followed Merritt, while Rosser, with three little brigades, dogged Custer, the men wild with rage as they watched the barns and mills and grain stacks go up in smoke at the hands of of their adversaries. Attacking furiously at every opportunity, the gray troopers, seeing those in blue steadily fall back, got to thinking that this "Fanny" Custer the West Point officers talked about wasn't such a long string of patching, after all.

Having withdrawn his army as far as Cedar Creek, on October 8 Sheridan gave orders to his chief of cavalry, General Torbert, to turn and attack the enemy, and either whip him "or get whipped himself." Accordingly, at daybreak of the 9th, Merritt and Custer moved out over the smooth Valley ground, long since denuded of fences. It was a beautiful autumn morning, and Rosser, on the back road, stood to meet Custer on a low range of hills behind Tom's Brook, the long lines of battle deploying in full view of each other.

Custer completes his arrangements and then, swinging his horse into a long stride, gallops alone to the front and halts, a glittering figure, between the hosts. Lifting his broad sombrero, he sweeps it to his knee in a profound salute to his honorable foe. Up on the hill surrounded by his staff, sits Rosser, watching him.

"You see that officer down there?" Custer's biographer, Whittaker, quotes Rosser as saying. "That's General Custer, and I intend to give him the best whipping today that he ever got. See if I don't."

So boastful a speech hardly sounds like Rosser. But, if he made it, he was badly mistaken. Next moment Custer raises his hand, and the 3rd Division, a long line of flashing sabers, sweeps forward at a trot. The pace quickens to a gallop, the batteries, Yankee and Rebel, open furiously, smoke and dust roll up, carbines crackle, and with a pounding thunder of hoofs the charge closes in on Rosser. Too late he sees that his flanks are overlapped. It is more than his men can stand. From flanks to center they crumble back and dissolve in a wild rout that runs for twenty miles with hardly a pause along the Valley pike, through Woodstock to Mount Jackson, losing all their trains and artillery, this time including "the headquarters wagons, desks, and papers of the rebel general Rosser," as Custer reported, with pardonable satisfaction. Thus ended "Woodstock Races," Custer's revenge for Buckland and Trevilian.

Matters were certainly going badly enough for the Confederates in the Valley, but General Early was a man of both courage and persistence. The discomfiture of his cavalry did not deter him from pressing steadily on northward until he came before the position north of Cedar Creek in which Sheridan had halted his army and begun fortifying. The Confederates stopped at Fisher's Hill and fortified, also, while daily skirmishing occurred between the lines. Rosser covered General Early's left, in an advanced position along the Back Road, where Custer lay in front of him.

Having been informed by his scouts that the camp of Custer's division was some miles behind the Union front, at Petticoat Gap, west of Winchester, Rosser on the night of October 16-17 made a daring effort to capture it. Taking two of his own brigades and mounting the infantry soldiers of Grimes' brigade behind his men, he made a wide circuit of thirty miles around the Union right flank and just before daybreak fell upon the designated spot. His attack was overwhelming, and if the camp had still been there it would have been wiped out. But fortunately for the Federals, it had been moved, and all the reward Rosser had for his pains was the capture of the picket post on Custer's extreme right, consisting of a major and about fifty men.

Next day, October 18, he was back with the army, in time to join the rest of the division commanders at General Early's headquarters on Round Hill, where the plans were formulated for the attack on Sheridan's position on Cedar Creek which was put into execution that night. The story of the brilliant early success and subsequent crushing defeat of the Confederates in this, their last bid for a decisive victory in the Valley, is too familiar to require repetition. Rosser, operating on the left, made a bold advance at the beginning of the battle but was later driven back with the rest of the army. Nevertheless, he took and kept a good many prisoners, and after the beginning of the rout he was sent for by General Early to cover the retreat of the broken forces to Edenburg a service which he performed as well as could have been expected under the circumstances.

There followed more of the same bitter medicine. Early's troops outnumbered three or more to one, after Cedar Creek were able to do little more through the winter than lie on the defensive in the lower Valley. But Rosser, elastic under whatever stunning blows, remained pugnacious. Promoted major general on November 1, he rounded up absentees, maintained and heightened the morale of his men by leading them more than once into spirited engagements with the hostile cavalry and from that time to the end conducted independent operations that would have added luster to the fame of any cavalry leader.

Although he was weak in numbers, his ingenuity and abundant daring enabled him on several occasions to put some of his most exalted opponents in a ridiculous light. One of these occasions came late in November, 1864. At that time Major General George Crook, commanding the Department of West Virginia, and his subordinate, Brigadier General Benjamin F. Kelley, at Cumberland, Maryland, were roused by rumors that Rosser had crossed the mountains and might attack some of their posts, and raid the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad near Cumberland. They telegraphed their suspicions to their immediate superior, General Sheridan, commanding in the Valley, and so did John W. Garrett, president of the Baltimore and Ohio. Sheridan, much irritated, on November 28 replied to Garrett in his usual blunt fashion, stating that ample precautions had been taken against any incursions by Rosser, and concluding: "General Kelley is very cautious about that which is in little danger, and not remarkably so about that which is. I will advise you when to commence running."

Even as this curt message was being transmitted, Rosser with 2,000 men, having moved rapidly northward across the mountains, "with great skill and boldness," as General R. E. Lee reported, was in the midst of the large Union supply depot at New Creek, West Virginia. Surprising the garrison in broad daylight, he had assaulted a strong fort armed with eight pieces of artillery and taken it, with its 700 defending troops, their flags and guidons, losing only two men killed and two wounded in the attack. In the government warehouses close by, the clerks were captured at their desks, the buildings fired, and a great quantity of quartermaster and commissary stores burned or carried off. That afternoon a strong detachment appeared at Piedmont, on the railroad, destroyed the warehouses, machine shops, and many cars, and wrecked nine locomotives. Rosser returned safely to Early's army with his prisoners and a battery of captured field guns, together with about 1,500 head of horses and as many beef cattle which he had taken.

Generals Crook and Kelley were very severe upon the commanding officer at New Creek for allowing his command to be surprised, and he was placed under arrest and brought before a general court-martial. In ironic commentary upon this action, Rosser, a few weeks later, sent Lieutenant Jesse C. McNeill with thirty well-mounted men to the department headquarters at Cumberland, where many Union troops were stationed. Entering the town at 3:00 o'clock on the morning- of February 21, 1865, McNeill's men overpowered the pickets, went straight to headquarters, located in a hotel, and seized the guards. Men then hurried to the rooms of Generals Crook and Kelley and some other officers and, without disturbing anyone else, roused them from sleep, forced them to dress, and hustled them down to the street, where saddled horses awaited them. Taking the headquarters flag along, the raiders marched swiftly out of Cumberland, cutting the telegraph wires as they went. The alarm was out within ten minutes, but though Union cavalry by the hundreds immediately began scouring the country, McNeill and his party with their distinguished prisoners were back in Staunton in three days.

Already, before the McNeill raid, Rosser himself, in the second week of January, had slipped, unsuspected, with a picked force of 300 men, over the crest of the Great North Mountain, where the snow lay from six to eighteen inches deep. The weather was shrivelling for Southerners; some days earlier even Custer, on a reconnaissance up the Valley, had 230 of his thick-blooded Yankees frostbitten. Nevertheless, Rosser marched a hundred miles from Staunton and before daylight on the 11th, having moved by a country lane around a spur of Cheat Mountain, came out in rear of the Union camps near Beverly, West Virginia.

The setting was reminiscent of Colonel Rall and his Hessians at Trenton, on Christmas night, 1776. Convinced that any attack in such weather was impossible, all the Federal outposts were drawn in save a few pickets; most of the officers were making merry at a ball in Beverly. No hint of danger disturbed the soldiers of the 34th Ohio Infantry and the 8th Ohio Cavalry, sleeping snugly in their log huts, until a swarm of gaunt, travel-worn rebels smashed in the doors and, thrusting rifles into their faces, summoned them to surrender. A dozen or so who resisted were shot down; the rest threw up their hands. Six hundred men, the entire personnel of the two

regiments excepting the absent officers, were marched off, with their arms and horses, to Staunton.

Kept thus to a keen edge, the spirits of Rosser's men were still unbroken when he led them into the most amazing fighting of his career, at Petersburg and in the retreat of Lee's exhausted army to Appomattox. On April 1, when the Confederate right was crushed in at Five Forks, he threw his slender division in front of two Union corps, holding the crossings of Hatcher's Run and saving the wagon trains north of it, at the same time keeping the vitally important Southside railroad open through that night. Five days later, while Lee's famishing troops struggled westward through apple and peach orchards sweet with bloom, Rosser, in advance, learned that a large body of Union cavalry had got ahead and reached High Bridge over the Appomattox River, intent on burning it and breaking the line of retreat.

He overtook the enemy and drove into them like a thunderbolt, killing their commander, General Theodore Read, taking Boo prisoners, and sending the rest flying. But he lost heavily himself, among the killed being his West Point classmate, General James Dearing, who was one of his brigade commanders, and Major James W. Thompson, his chief of artillery. Next day, April 7, the blue cavalry, attacking the fugitive columns from the left flank, tried to break in upon the wagon train. While Munford's division resisted them in front, Rosser's dashed around and struck them in flank, driving them back and capturing their division commander, General J. Irvin Gregg.

These successes, it is to be remembered, were gained while the Army of Northern Virginia was drawing its last gasps. On the night of the 8th, that army having reached Appomattox Court House, General Lee informed his corps commanders, in effect, that if strong forces of hostile infantry, as well as cavalry, should be found across the line of retreat in the morning, he would regard it as his duty to surrender. Rosser and General John B. Gordon desired to make an attack on the rear of Grant's columns and attempt to burn his supply trains, which they believed might compel him to halt or even retreat, but they were overruled. General Fitzhugh Lee, commanding the cavalry corps, stated that if a surrender was impending, he would make an effort to extricate the mounted troops before negotiations should be opened.

The worst fears were realized when at dawn Gordon's infantry, with the three cavalry divisions on his right, attacked the enemy in front, drove back the opposing horse, and developed dense masses of infantry in line of battle beyond. Rosser, at the head of his own and Munford's divisions and Chew's battalion of horse artillery, having by his charge driven aside Mackenzie's cavalry division from the direct road to Lynchburg, rode right on and arrived at that city before night.

From Lynchburg, Rosser went to Danville, where some of the Confederate civil authorities had gathered. John C. Breckenridge, Secretary of War, authorized him to reorganize the Confederate troops still scattered through the country and placed him in command of all forces he could collect in Virginia. With unquenchable optimism, Rosser issued orders, posted proclamations, and was otherwise busily engaged in carrying forward his utterly hopeless plans, when he was surprised and captured at "Courtland," the home of his wife's family near Hanover Court House, on May 2, 1865.

So, at last, and tardily, the war was over for General Tom Rosser. Twenty-eight years old, and two hundred pounds of active muscular manhood, he was flat broke, like millions of his countrymen. With a wife and three small children dependent upon him, he had to do something or sink. Hopefully he set out to study law with Judge Brockenborough, at Lexington. But the confinement irked him, and he went to work for the National Express Company, under General Joseph E. Johnston. Something happened, and before long he was in Baltimore, employed at the city water works. But by 1868 this was over, and he was holding a minor engineering position on the Pittsburg and Connellsville Railroad.

Thus far this ex-major general of cavalry had found nothing more than petty jobs. But he would not be downed. Though he had no technical training beyond the engineering he had studied at West Point, he determined to make his way in railroad construction—something which would give him freedom in the open air, and play for his fertile brain and capacities for leadership. He applied to the Cincinnati and Ohio Railroad for a slightly better position than he held on the other line, but was refused because he was "too much of a rebel."

"Very well," thought Tom Rosser. "Out in the Northwest they're not so prejudiced. That's where they're building real railroads, anyway." So one day in 1871, in the booming little city of Saint Paul, Minnesota, William L. Banning, president of the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad, looked up from his desk into the bronzed face of a stranger who had to duck his head when he came through the doorway. Mr. Banning asked his name, and through his mind shot vivid impressions of yelling rebel cavalry at Catlett's, Buckland, Trevilian, with this long-legged centaur right out in front of them. He leaned back in his chair and smiled kindly.

"I'm sorry, General Rosser, but all the leading places in the engineering department are full."

"Mr. Banning, I thank you, sir," said Rosser, in his courtly Southern way. "I do not wish a leading position. I just want a job, sir."

So President Banning wrote a note to his chief engineer, and shortly Major General Rosser was handed an axe and told to report to a gang that was clearing timber on the right of way. He was also advised that if he chopped satisfactorily, he would find forty dollars in his pay envelope at the end of the month. Rosser laid to with the Swedes and the Finns, doubtless sizing up this Minnesota stumpage with the Panola County pines he had felled and squared with his father along the Sabine, in days be-

fore the war. That experience stood him in good stead now;, he stayed on the construction gang just long enough to draw his forty dollars once. The next month he was advanced to transit-man, and in 1872 he went over to the Northern Pacific as an assistant engineer of construction.

Highly trained professionals were abundant, but Rosser's combination of abilities gave him a great advantage. He was soon made chief locating and constructing engineer to complete track from Lake Superior to the Missouri River and to run the preliminary survey from that stream to the foothills of the Rockies. By this time he was earning a good salary, and he purchased a home in Minneapolis and moved his family there.

Then one day in the early summer of 1873, at track end in the wild frontier town of Bismarck, on the shore of the Missouri, there occurred an incident as romantic as could be found in fiction. Rosser, arriving to start his survey westward, met the lieutenant colonel, United States Army, who was to command the cavalry of the escort for the surveying party through the Indian country. This officer was a high-strung, blond man in a broad sombrero, with a red necktie, and yellow curls rippling over the collar of his buckskin suit. They stared, then fell on each other's shoulders. It was Custer, no longer the gallant foe of Buckland, Trevilian, and Woodstock, but the still earlier comrade of the Military Academy; "cadets together," as Custer himself wrote later, "occupying adjoining rooms, members of the same company, often marching side by side in our military duties."

It was little wonder that there was rejoicing that day, and all that summer, as the two of them rode, side by side once more, over the Montana uplands or the grassy bottoms beside the Yellowstone, in chase of antelope and buffalo, or occasionally of a prowling war party of Ogallallas. And what reminiscences of war and peace around the flickering bivouac fires, or on the deck of the supply steamer *Josephine,* in the short summer evenings, while the coyotes yelped out on the empty prairies, and Custer's pack of deer hounds bayed the moon down by the wagon corral. They carried the preliminary survey that summer to Pompey's Pillar, where it was closed on the line already run east from Bozeman. In the fall the expedition returned to Bismarck.

Three years after that came the tragic death of General Custer in the battle of the Little Big Horn. His passing was a blow to General Rosser, who thought that he saw the cause for the disaster in the conduct of certain of Custer's subordinates and said so with characteristic loyalty and vigor in an open letter published in some of the leading newspapers of the country. In concluding, he expressed his emotion concerning his old comrade and adversary in feeling words. "I have known General Custer intimately from boyhood and, being on opposite sides during the late war, we often met and measured strength on the fields of Virginia; and I can truly say now that I never met a more enterprising, gallant or dangerous an enemy during those four years of terrible war, or a more genial, whole-souled, chivalrous gentleman and friend in peace than Major General George A. Custer."

His letter was answered hotly by Major Marcus A. Reno, Custer's second in command, who in the battle had conducted the defense of the surviving companies of the 7th Cavalry. The controversy was finally terminated by Rosser, who handsomely retracted his charges of misconduct when he had read the official reports of the engagement, though still insisting that grave errors on the part of others had occasioned the failure and death of Custer. In later years, volumes have been written in either criticism or defense of every act and nearly every actor in the Little Big Horn campaign, but Rosser was the first to publicly take up the cudgels in that classic controversy.

Continuing with the Northern Pacific, except for one interval of two years, until 1881, General Rosser carried the line across the Missouri and superintended its construction as far as Livingston, Montana. His genius for driving the work ahead was well illustrated in the winter of 1878-'9, when he saved a delay of four or five months by laying a track on the thick ice of the Missouri River at Bismarck and hauling steel, ties and other materials across, so that construction might not be halted west of the stream. Immediately after leaving the Northern Pacific, he became chief engineer for the Canadian Pacific, and planned and built its line across the prairies of Alberta and Saskatchewan from Winnipeg nearly to the foot of the Selkirks.

By 1883 General Rosser had acquired a competence, and though the people of the Northwest urged him to remain among them, the land of his ancestors, his childhood, and his battles called him. He returned to Virginia, bought the farm near Charlottesville which had once belonged to his father, built a home where his children might attend the University of Virginia, and settled down to spend the remainder of his life as a gentleman farmer, living, as one of his warm friends in Republican Minnesota once wrote, "in dignified retirement," except when "occasionally giving vent to an epistolary shout on the Democratic side of politics, or a stump speech which set the political teeth of the nation on edge." This was written at a time when General Rosser was reported to be a candidate for Congress from his district in Virginia. But the Minnesotan boldly avowed political heresy in this case. "General Rosser's ability has been manifested in every field," he declared. "His courage, tenacity of purpose, and rectitude of character are recognized by all who know him, and while I am a Republican, I am ready to confess a strong personal predilection for General Rosser."

He did not run for Congress, preferring the varied pursuits of a country life. A robust, nature-loving man, though he now weighed 250 pounds, his son, Thomas L. Rosser, Jr., declares that he was "very active, and could outrun and out-jump any of us boys." So he still was, at sixty-two years of age, when in 1898 the calls to arms rang over the country for the war with Spain.

The die-hard ex-Confederate who never surrendered, burned at once to prove by an act of signal devotion his loyalty to the reunited country of which he had become so prominent a citizen. Still within the limit of military age, he offered his services to the government and President McKinley commissioned him a brigadier general, United States Volunteers, on June 10, 1898. He was placed at the head of the 3rd Brigade, 2nd Division, 1st Army Corps, his command consisting entirely of Northern troops; the 14th Minnesota, 2nd Ohio, and 1st Pennsylvania regiments of infantry. The brigade mobilized at Chickamauga Park, and throughout the summer General Rosser was engaged there in drilling and equipping his troops for battle. The war terminated, however, before they were called into the field, and at the end of November General Rosser was honorably discharged.

A man of his disposition, however, could never remain inactive. With his old friend and commander, General Fitzhugh Lee, he became interested in some land development in Cuba, but returned in about a year to Virginia. Here he continued the management of his model dairy farm, at the same time promoting a soapstone quarry near Charlottesville. In 1904 he was appointed postmaster at Charlottesville. He was still holding this position, active and alert to all the affairs of life, when the final call came. On March 29, 1910, in the seventy-fourth year of his age, General Tom Rosser, head high and clean of soul, reported before the Great Commander-in-Chief.

Here was a man who, from childhood to age, never admitted timidity of any sort into his life. Courage was of the very fiber of his being, alike on the battlefield and in the peaceful affairs of existence. Nevertheless, he was as logical as he was brave. Fighting to the last for the cause in which he devoutly believed, when it was lost he saw that the people of the South must, inevitably, accept the situation and go right on living with the people of the North, and the sooner they got back into teamwork, the better for both. He applied that reasoning personally and proved it true by actually going North and making a notable place for himself among his former foes.

In his application of the same fearless realism to every problem which he confronted may be discovered one of the reasons for his numerous successes, particularly in those swift surprise attacks which have always been favorite enterprises with American cavalry. To be sure, when acting under the command of others he was a good subordinate, carrying out his orders as well as the best. But his real genius began to manifest itself only when he was engaged in independent operations. So far as the record shows, he never of his own volition attempted the impossible, though some of his enterprises must, at their inception, have appeared rash in the extreme to others. But he had the faculty of gauging a situation accurately and adopting projects which were not beyond achievement with the means at hand. Having clearly defined his plans in his own mind, he dismissed all fears and hesitations, and relying upon the practical certainty that the enemy could not guess his intentions as well as he knew them himself, he drove straight through to his objective and generally attained it. Had he come to independent command earlier than he did, it is probable that even more notable successes would have been his, for few commanders have done better than he with very limited resources.

But with all his invincible will, his genius, and power of command, General Rosser possessed another quality which mellowed and humanized all the rest; an unusual ability to inspire and retain the love of friends. His relations with Custer furnish the notable example. But a host of other friendships, in the North as well as the South, similarly illustrate his warmth and sincerity of heart and prove that the words he once wrote of Custer accurately sum up his own straightforward virtues: "There was never a more enterprising, gallant, or dangerous enemy, or a more genial, whole-souled, chivalrous gentleman and friend."