

TOOMBS' SIX MONTHS OF PERIL AS A FUGITIVE

STORY Told in Detail for the First Time of the Game of Hide and Seek That the Confederate General Played with the Federal Troops Before He Finally Escaped from the Country

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ROBERT TOOMBS

ROBERT TOOMBS was easily the most picturesque figure among the leaders of Southern thought during those momentous years which led up to the time when the South finally decided to try the issue of battle with the North. As impetuous as the torrents which go coursing through the rocky gorges of his native highlands in Northeast Georgia, he was as nonchalant as the sweep of the floodtide. His was the day when the orator on the hustings swayed public opinion, and the man who could win the applause of the crowd could feel confident of the ground upon which he stood.

The great mass of people did not then have the opportunity of reading and evolving their own thoughts in regard to public matters, and of necessity left this largely to their leaders.

Up to the time when it was realized that the great struggle between the North and the South was approaching, and almost inevitable, the success of Robert Toombs in the forum and on the hustings was little short of marvellous. Although of impetuous nature he was a man of the highest sense of justice between man and man, regardless of their condition or station in life, and this was a tower of strength to him in combating opposition before the people.

Robert Toombs had been in the lower house of Congress and in the Senate for the last sixteen years leading up to the time when he resigned his seat in the latter body and cast his fortunes with the Southern Confederacy. His utterances there had, perhaps, done more than the words of any other member to make the struggle between the North and the South inevitable. On January 7, 1861, he resigned his seat in the Senate in a remarkable speech. Mr. Blaine said of this utterance that it was the only speech made by a representative of the seceding States which specified the grievances of the South and which named the conditions upon which the States would remain in the Union.

Toombs was then just fifty-one years old and in his full vigor, both mentally and physically. Going back to his native State on January 16 he attended as a delegate the State Sovereignty Convention, popularly known as the secession convention, which was held at Milledgeville, the then capital of Georgia. With Toombs the die had been cast, and he put forth his greatest powers to take his State out of the Union and succeeded. In this convention Stephens, Hill and Johnson, other prominent leaders, opposed secession. Toombs won by a vote of 208 against 89.

His native State, which was always so near to him, was backing him up, and he felt his lionine power as never before. He recked little of consequences. Events came in rapid succession for those days. This was due primarily to the fact that Mr. Lincoln was to be inaugurated President of the United States on March 4, and the South wanted to take action before that momentous time should roll round. On February 4 delegates from a number, though not all, of the Southern States met at Montgomery, Ala., to form the Southern Confederacy and elect a President. Toombs was there as a delegate from Georgia, and it was generally thought that he would be named as the Chief Executive of the new government, but the tide turned and Jefferson Davis was elected President.

Following the custom which had generally prevailed in the United States government, Toombs being the next most prominent man for President, was made Secretary of State. That the impetuous Toombs was no man for second place in civil or military affairs was clearly demonstrated in the events that followed. He served in the Cabinet for only a few brief months, and resigning accepted a position as brigadier general in the army of Northern Virginia in July, 1861. He served there with gallantry for about one year, but after the battle of Antietam, in which he distinguished himself, being wounded at its close, he resigned his commission in the army and returned to his home in Georgia. He felt that he had not been treated with proper consideration by the authorities at Richmond. Never again was he connected with the civil or military departments of the Confederate government, but he did serve with the State troops around Atlanta and Savannah.

The government was not carried on according to his ideas and he did not care to take any of the responsibility on himself. At the close of hostilities he quietly retired to his home in Washington, Ga. General Toombs was here at his home in Washington when Mr. Davis and four members of his cabinet—Mr. Benjamin, Secretary of State; Mr. Breckenridge, Secretary of War; Mr. Mallory, Secretary of the Navy; and Mr. Reagan, Postmaster General—arrived on their flight south from Richmond after Lee's surrender. There in an old bank building, occupied as a residence, Mr. Davis was entertained overnight and held his last Cabinet meeting. The party arrived on May 4, 1865, and left in different directions on the following day. A few days later Mr. Davis was captured about seventy-five miles further south.

While in Washington General Breckenridge spent the night with General Toombs at his home. Next morning on leaving his host he urged him to accept some of the gold and silver belonging to the Confederate Treasury, which had been taken there from Richmond, saying that in these trying times he might stand much in need of it. But the unwavering integrity of Toombs asserted itself and he positively refused to take a dollar of it, saying that it was not his and he

would not take it, no matter what the exigencies of the situation might be. But nevertheless General Breckenridge sent him \$5,000 in sacks by some soldiers. General Toombs still refused the money, but acting on their orders the soldiers threw down the money in the front yard.

As Breckenridge and all the other members of the Cabinet had departed, General Toombs sent his treasure down town to Mr. Robert Vickers, who was noted for his fatherly care in providing for the soldiers. Many were passing through and they were in great need. The writer has seen some of this coin, which had been kept by the men's sons.

The relations between Davis and Toombs were strained, and the two did not meet at that time, but in after years General Toombs remarked to the writer that he sent word to Mr. Davis while he was in Washington, Ga., that if he would place himself in his (Toombs') hands he would be taken safely out of the country. But the offer was not accepted. Toombs' remarkable success in hiding for six months while the country was being scoured for him by federal sol-

General Toombs said the Yankees wanted to take him through the North as a show, and this thought made him the more determined not to be captured. He went well armed and had fully made up his mind to fight to the last in the event the attempt should be made to arrest him. The two men travelled generally at night when going over the main roads, but these were avoided when moving during the day. It is remarkable that they never stopped with people whom Toombs did not know, but they did not always recognize him. He was somewhat disguised, as he wore a brown jeans suit with sack coat and had allowed his full beard to grow out. He also got some green goggles to help disguise him, but he wore these only a day or two.

As a young lawyer, and later in his practice and political campaigns, he had travelled very thoroughly over that part of the country, having friends and admirers everywhere, and now when he so sorely needed their friendship they were drawn the closer to him. Going to the home of Alexander Le Seur, on the Savannah River, his host received him with great hospitality, at the same time twitting Toombs with the remark:—"You have been fighting me all these years in politics, and now I am the first man you come to in your trouble." Le Seur owned a large island in the river and Toombs was in hiding for a while on this island, but learning that there were United States soldiers near by on the South Carolina side, he decided that this place was untenable for his purpose.

Sending Irvin home with letters to Mrs. Toombs, the fugitive started along up the valley of the Savannah River toward the mountains of Habersham county. All this time troops were searching far and near through the section of country around Washington for

the officer who had him in charge that a momentous discovery could easily be made. Unexpectedly meeting a friend, John Weems, on the street, he stopped him with the remark:—"John, I am on my way to prison and want to return you that money I borrowed from you. I don't know when I'll see you again."

Turning his back on the federal soldier, he slipped these important papers to Weems, who "caught on" at once and expressed no surprise. Irvin was carried to the guard house, where greatly to his relief he found that the charge against him was "wearing a Confederate uniform with brass buttons on it."

In a few moments friends dropped in to see him and from them he learned that the persons General Toombs had sent him to Savannah to see were not in the city. As he was ready to depart the charge against him was dismissed, and he was allowed to go, still wearing his uniform and buttons.

Lieutenant Irvin got back to General Toombs in the mountains the latter part of June, and then another route of escape was worked out, the one which was finally successful, though for the time it was frustrated and hundreds of miles had to be retraced and travelled over for the second and third times. Bidding Colonel Rembert, his most hospitable host, good-bye, General Toombs mounted his horse, and with young Irvin, struck out for freedom by way of the gulf coast, with a view to reaching New Orleans.

It was planned by General Toombs to visit his wife at home before leaving for a foreign shore. There was never more beautiful devotion between man and wife than that which blended the lives of these two during their wedded life of more than fifty years. Going down through Elbert county he came as near to

Worthen told him Toombs had been there and was then at Major Gonder's, further on. When it was so difficult for his friends to find Toombs it was small wonder that others could not.

Loyalty of a Southern Woman.

Riding up to the front door of the Gonder home, Irvin found Mrs. Gonder and her daughter sitting on the front porch. He made the usual inquiries that he had been making for the last several hundred miles along the country roads, and they made the usual answers that they knew nothing of the old man on a gray horse. But Irvin was insistent and told them that he had been sent there to find him. Mrs. Gonder could not suppress her excitement and, rocking vigorously back and forth in her big rocking chair, showed her perturbation to a marked degree. Irvin then told her that he saw that she knew more than she was willing to tell. Then she blurted out:—"Well, I'll die before I tell it." It was an annoying delay, but the young man finally convinced Mrs. Gonder of his sincerity in endeavoring to aid General Toombs, and she crossed the street to the home of Captain "Jack" Smith, on the Oconee River.

Reaching the latter place the Captain met the young man out in front of the house, and in a manner that would have convinced almost any man in ordinary circumstances denied knowing anything of an old man on a gray horse. But Irvin had gotten a glimpse of General Toombs in the house and sent in his name. This at last brought about a reunion of Toombs and his scout. The two men remained there for about a week, fishing on the river and learning all they could in regard to the route that lay before them. It was ascertained that the public forces were being closely watched by federal soldiers. However, they crossed in a bateau, swimming their horses, and went to the home of Joseph Deas, in Wilkeson county.

Here Toombs passed as Major Martin and was unknown to his host. After supper they conversed together until bedtime, when the guests retired. A maiden sister, who was a member of the household, then remarked to her brother:—"Joe Deas, I am sure you know that you don't know that is General Toombs?" Without further ado Deas made a break for Toombs' room, where he expressed the great honor he felt in entertaining him. They had heard him speak at Toombsboro seventeen years before.

From there they went to the home of Colonel David Hughes, in Twiggs county. Hughes had been in Toombs' brigade in the army, and between the two men there was that comradeship that is known only among soldiers. Young Irvin went up to Macon to cast about and see if it would be wise to proceed further. But he found there a great number of Union troops and had reason to believe that ferries and thoroughfares were being very closely guarded and every effort was being made to capture General Toombs. When he returned and made his report the General at once determined to retrace his steps and make his way back to the mountains of North Georgia. This was done with great celerity, and it was not long before the two men were again at the home of Colonel Rembert, in Habersham county, near the Tennessee line. Here General Toombs remained quietly, Irvin going back and forth with messages to the home in Washington, Ga. Again, in the month of October, the two men started out, this time to make a successful trip over the same route, which finally ended at New Orleans. By this time the federal authorities had tried and had ceased their vigilance. The alarms of war had in a large measure died away and the country had taken on a more peaceful aspect. The two men rode their horses along the public roads with little fear of molestation and free from the delays which were incident to the former trip.

It was on this trip, while passing through Hancock county, near Sparta, that General Toombs had a most sumptuous dinner at a spring in the woods. Linton Stephens, R. M. Johnson, W. W. Simpson, "Jack" Lane, Edge Bird and other prominent and wealthy men were present. Faithful negro attendants did the serving. On that day a Masonic lodge was assembled, and Toombs was initiated into the mysteries of the order. In the days which followed he found the fellowship of Masonry of incalculable benefit to him. He was afterward a high Mason and to the end of his life a most devoted one. These staunch friends who entertained him on that day, on his departure from them, furnished him all the gold coin that he could carry.

It was not until they had reached on "Old Turnwell," down in Southwest Georgia, not far from the Chattahoochee River, that the nearest escape from capture in all their journeyings occurred. Going over the rise of a hill they rode right into a command of Union soldiers. Turning back would have been fatal, and the only course to be pursued was to put on a bold front and with perfect nonchalance ride on. The officer in command stepped out and saluted them. What next? He dropped a remark that completely relieved the feelings of the wayfarers. He was only admiring their splendid horses. He knew nothing and they knew all. There was not a word nor an act that would arouse suspicion, and the two men rode leisurely along. But it was perhaps the closest call yet experienced by Robert Toombs.

"But the night shall be filled with music—
And the cares that infest the day
Shall fold their tents like the Arabs
And as silently steal away."

The two men stopped that night at the home of a Mr. Brown, where they found guests assembling for a great wedding. The daughter of the host, who had married that night and all were making merry. It need not be said that General Toombs was the most welcome guest of all the assemblage.

Accompanied by his faithful guide Toombs went from there to his plantation, in Stewart county. He had been in the saddle for six months and had thoroughly tired of it. Here he procured an ambulance in which to travel. When he left his gray mare Alice neighed for him in a manner that was akin to a human farewell. The two men crossed the Chattahoochee River into Alabama and took the train at Evergreen. Not caring to run into Mobile on the train they got off at Tensiss and took a boat for that city. It looked as if they had gotten into a hornet's nest, as the boat was full of federal soldiers. However, without any untoward incident they landed at Mobile and went immediately to the home of the author, Miss Augusta Evans.

Recognized Aboard Ship.

Here General Toombs remained until Lieutenant Irvin went over to New Orleans and perfected arrangements for him to pass out through that port. From the Spanish Consul he got a passport for Major Luther Martin to Havana. Going back to Mobile Irvin accompanied Toombs by steamer to New Orleans. Aboard this steamer at night a man stood in a doorway and eyed Toombs very closely. Irvin stepped out and engaged him in conversation with a view to throwing him over the taffrail, but he found that the man was Colonel M. C. Fulton, of Georgia, and friendly to General Toombs.

Reaching New Orleans General Toombs went to the home of Colonel Marshall J. Smith. Irvin went out and bought him a fine suit of clothes. Putting these on he drove in a closed carriage down to the dock and went aboard the steamship for Havana. After his long experience as a fugitive he strode the deck like a lordly man on his way, against Irvin's protestations. He was recognized by General Humphrey, marshal of Texas, but the steamship soon departed and Toombs was safe from his pursuers.

By way of Havana he went to Paris, where he was joined a few months after by his wife. She remained with him for more than a year, but returned home shortly after on account of the death of their daughter, Mrs. D. M. DuRose. General Toombs remained abroad till 1878, when he returned by way of Canada. From there he went to Washington, D. C., where he had a long and friendly interview with President Johnson. He returned to his home in Georgia, never being molested. He was honored by his home people as few other men have been honored. He died here on December 15, 1885. The town clock was stopped till after his burial and every building in town was draped in mourning.



The Two Men Rode Leisurely Along.

ders and his final escape make it reasonable to think that he might have carried out his promise.

Order for His Arrest.

Secretary of War Stanton, at Washington, D. C., had issued an order for the arrest of Robert Toombs. On May 11 a squad of soldiers in command of General Wilde arrived at Washington, Ga., on the train and, marching through town, went to the home of Toombs. When they arrived there General Toombs was in the house, but while his daughter detained them at the front door as long as she could, he made his escape through the back premises to his negro quarters on an adjoining farm that he owned. From there he made his way to the home of Captain J. T. Wingfield, two miles distant. The latter was captain of the famous Irvin artillery, which served through the entire war in Lee's army. He got a horse from Wingfield, and as he mounted and rode off, in the most nonchalant way, he remarked:—"John, I have fox hunted all over this country. Now let the Yankees catch me if they can."

From there he made a circuit of the town to the home of Sheriff James Dyson, several miles out, as that was in the direction of the mountains of Northeast Georgia, where he had already determined to go. It was then a wild country, with no railroads. One of the most striking characteristics of Robert Toombs was that he understood men as few others ever have, and knew in whom to repose confidence. He trusted the discretion of many whom he knew to be loyal and courageous.

From the Dyson home he sent word to Lieutenant Charles E. Irvin, a man of twenty years, who never knew what fear was, to bring his gray mare Alice and meet him at Chenault's at sunrise next morning. This was fourteen miles north of Washington. Toombs himself made the trip alone at night on horseback. Irvin was promptly on hand, and continued with him in his hidings and wanderings through the many months that followed. From there the two men crossed Broad River and rode over into Elbert county to the home of Major Luther Martin, whose parole Toombs procured, and from that time on through all of his journeyings he passed, among those who did not know him, as "Major Martin."

The role of a fugitive was entirely contrivance in the career of the tempestuous Toombs, and he never liked to talk about it, even after it was all over. During his lifetime the writer endeavored to get the story directly from him, but he declined to narrate it. The full details have been procured from Lieutenant Irvin, who is still living.

him, but he never encountered them and never in all his wanderings had to use the parole he had procured.

Having instructed young Irvin that on his return he would find him at Colonel Prather's, on the Tugaloo River, Toombs wended his way to that mountain home, where he awaited the return of his scout. Bringing messages from his home in Washington, Ga., to the General, Lieutenant Irvin got back to the hiding place of Toombs after an absence of just one week. From there the two went to the home of General Rembert, in Habersham county, this being as secluded a spot for concealing a fugitive as could be found in all the Southern country. Toombs felt perfectly free from his pursuers here and spent a good deal of his time in shooting and fishing.

But, nevertheless, Toombs was restless in his mountain resort, as all who knew him can well understand, and he longed to be the free and bold man of his former days. At one time he had Irvin ride with him over to Walhalla, S. C., prospecting, with a view of reaching the Carolina coast, from which he hoped to find a friendly ship that would bear him away from his native land. Here he met many on whose loyalty he could thoroughly rely, and all with one accord warned him that this would be a most dangerous course for him to pursue. They told him that there were numerous federal troops between there and the coast and every port was well guarded. General Toombs at once gave up the idea of trying this route.

Toombs and Irvin then returned to Colonel Rembert's on horseback, the manner in which they always travelled, and the General continued to evolve his plans for escaping. He then determined to make an effort to get out through the port of Savannah, and sent Irvin on the mission of preparing the way. The latter rode down to Washington, Ga., on horseback, taking messages to Mrs. Toombs. There he took the train for Savannah, where he arrived during the night.

Stratagem of the Scout.

Here occurred an incident which would have unnerved most men. The streets were being patrolled by federal soldiers, and the next morning Lieutenant Irvin had hardly stepped out of his hotel when he was promptly arrested by one of them and marched to the guard house. He thought, of course, that his mission had been discovered and that his arrest would lead to the finding of General Toombs in his place of hiding. Irvin had papers in his pocket that would betray the whole affair. But Irvin never lost his head for a moment, and there was not a quiver to betray

being captured as at any other time during the entire six months in which he was evading his pursuers. One day he insisted on going to the home of Major Martin, who had served in his brigade in the army in Virginia, and whose parole he was carrying in his pocket. But Lieutenant Irvin insisted that this would be extra hazardous, and finally prevailed on him to go and spend the night at the home of Colonel W. H. Maddox. It was well for him that he did, for that very night a command comprising about thirty soldiers went to the Martin home and thoroughly searched the place for him. By detouring far to the west the fugitive and his guide struck out on horseback at night for Wilkes county, of which Washington is the county seat. They forded the waters of the upper Broad river and took refuge at the home of DuBois Hill, a large planter. Irvin went into town to ascertain if Toombs could make the venture without being captured.

Lieutenant Irvin found in Washington Captain Lot Abraham, of the Eleventh Iowa regiment, with a large garrison of soldiers, squads from which were being constantly sent out in search of General Toombs. The youthful Confederate lieutenant fell in with the federal captain in a soldierly way and learned all that he could from him. It was quite remarkable that it was not once suspected that Irvin was the scout and guide for the great man whose capture was so much desired by Secretary of War Stanton, and for whom thousands of federal troops were so assiduously searching. But Toombs had the incomparable advantage of being on his native heath and among his friends, while those who sought him were in the enemy's country, as it were.

Reporting back to General Toombs that it would be too hazardous for him to venture a visit to Washington, the latter went on his way alone down into the counties south of this. He told Irvin to meet him down in Hancock county, but so well had he covered his tracks that a few days later when Irvin undertook to find him he found it almost impossible to do so. He travelled back and forth many miles, and almost any other man would have given up the search. Irvin was quite a youth and was unknown to these people. He called at the home of Judge Linton Stephens, in Sparta, and, meeting the Judge himself, inquired for General Toombs, but the Judge so flatly denied knowing anything of him that it would have confounded Irvin if he had not perceived through all of this Stephens' loyalty to Toombs. With great difficulty Irvin proved his identity and his mission, and then Stephens agreed to take him to Toombs. But even then it was no easy matter to find the fugitive.

It was learned that Toombs had been at the plantation of David Dickson. Irvin, then going alone, met the manager, Mr. Worthen, and inquired about an old man, riding a gray horse, whom he received a similar puzzling answer:—"No, I know nothing of him." Irvin finally convinced him that he was a friend and