

## A Survivor of "The Charge of the Light Brigade"

By JULIA LE CLERC KNOX

John Thomas O'Day lies buried in the rural cemetery of Ebenzer Church near Moorefield, Indiana. Switzerland County, in which this old graveyard may be found, has the honor of having been for many years the dwelling place of this survivor of the disastrous but glorious charge which Tennyson immortalized in the stanzas of "The Charge of the Light Brigade." It was in the Battle of Balaklava, an important engagement of the Crimean War,<sup>1</sup> that in the phrasing of the poet,

Into the valley of death  
Rode the six hundred.

So much did "Old Tommy" O'Day, as he was familiarly called, take his experiences as "all in the day's business" and so little did he seem to understand or value the prestige to which they entitled him, that he could seldom be persuaded to talk about them. Once when confronted by an interviewer, he exclaimed: "So ye want to write a piece in the paper about me and make some money out of it, do ye?" Then with a shrewd twinkle in his keen, little eyes, he shut up like a clam.

A friend in whom he had confidence approached him one day and finding him willing to talk drew him out at some length. This friend wrote up the interview in her own words and preserved the autobiographical information furnished by the veteran of the Crimean War. In a letter to the author of August 20, 1934, Mrs. A. V. Danner of Vevay, Indiana, for she it was who won the confidence of "Old Tommy," says:

I am glad to be able to do something toward placing Tommy O'Day upon the State's roster of heroes. When I took the notes on his talk, he was a middle-aged man and had a keen intellect but was very ignorant and somewhat sensitive. I had never met him before and had doubted his story which I had heard from others. He soon converted me to the sincere truth of his clear, simple statements about his experiences which he could not have learned from another. He had to be there to know it all. It is too bad that he sent all of his medals back to England and gave his sword away, so he had nothing left to show to prove his tale authentic.

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<sup>1</sup> The Crimean War centered in a peninsula of Russia extending into the north part of the Black Sea, known as the Crimea. Great Britain, France and the Kingdom of Sardinia, or Sardinia-Piedmont, supported the Turks against Russia. The War started at the beginning of 1854 and ended early in 1856.

Parts of the story related by the survivor of the famous charge as written down years ago by Mrs. Danner follow:

My father was Patrick O'Day and my mother's maiden name was Limmen. They lived in Dublin, Ireland, where I was born Nov. 9th, 1833. I was one of seven children. My father worked in the coal mines of Wales and came home every four or six weeks. When I was a boy I broke rock in the streets of Dublin. When I was quite young (fourteen), I ran away from home and enlisted in the army at Bristol against my parents' wishes. Afterwards I was sorry too.

The veteran then related how he had sailed from Portsmouth some years later along with a part of his regiment. The transports coaled at Gibraltar and again at Malta after which they proceeded to the Dardanelles and Constantinople. From this city the British troops were transferred to the Crimea, where they were joined by French and Turkish forces.

It was thought the Russians intended to capture our guns and to prevent this our company, the Sixteenth Enniskillens,<sup>2</sup> commanded by Lord Cardigan, were ordered to charge.<sup>3</sup> The commander of the brigade at this time, was on his yacht in the harbor and when he reached us we were in the saddle waiting. Some said Lord Cardigan refused to obey and that he hesitated as long as he dared.<sup>4</sup> I don't know about that, I only know the valley lay before us about a mile or a mile and a half long. We went four abreast. I was in the second section of our Company B. Death stared at us, but it was death to refuse to go. I was scared and could only think of the folks back home. The trumpet sounded and we started off at an easy trot. Full charge away we went for sixty yards when the Russians opened volley on us. My horse (Nig) was killed as he lunged forward, so I sprang off, caught a riderless horse, mounted and started back at the first chance I got. Some say they went through the valley<sup>5</sup> but I did not. I started back as quickly as I could.

When we came out of the charge only seven mounted men reported to roll call. I was one of them. Others who had been wounded reported later. My only hurt was a splinter in the calf of my leg. The battle lasted nine hours. I don't know how many were killed. They never told us. I lost two brothers and an uncle on this battlefield which I saw afterwards. My horse (Nig) had seen sixteen years service in the army.

<sup>2</sup> These soldiers are often spoken of as the "Inniskillings."

<sup>3</sup> There was much controversy between Lord Cardigan and his brother-in-law, Lord Lucan, after the event, as to the responsibility for the charge of the Light Brigade. Lucan was the immediate superior of Cardigan. They were not on speaking terms with each other.

<sup>4</sup> It is evident that Lord Cardigan was sure that the order was a blunder, but after a protest to Lord Lucan, he rode boldly at the head of his first line.

<sup>5</sup> There is no doubt about a part of the brigade going through the valley. "The men who reached the end of that valley of death rode through the guns, scattered the gunners, and returned; but of six hundred and seventy-three horsemen who had followed the devoted Cardigan . . . only one hundred ninety-five answered at roll-call. The French General Bosquet rendered all eulogy insipid, all criticism tame, by his epigrammatic comment—*C'était magnifique mais ce n'était pas la guerre.*" (It was splendid but it was not war.) Sir Herbert Maxwell, *A Century of Empire, 1801-1900*, II, 239.

I was at Inkerman and between that battle and Alma<sup>6</sup> I went out as a scout as my regiment was [had been] cut to pieces. With several other privates I took a Russian battery, spiked the guns and held the fort. But an officer came up, claimed he did the work, got the honors and is wearing the "Victory Cross" today [1902]—if he is alive. A private has no chance for a "Victory Cross" as the officers claim all the honors.

I got my second wound near Inkerman and while in the hospital I saw Florence Nightingale.<sup>7</sup> I was in the Battle of Alma which was on the heights and hard to get to. Between the battle of Balaklava and Sebastopol,<sup>8</sup> Lord Cardigan died. [?] His throat was cut and they say he was murdered by the soldiers.<sup>9</sup>

We were seven months guarding territory near Sebastopol and then were sent to Malta in the same ship we came over in and were kept there a year. Malta is not a good place to sleep for there are the queerest Catholics there I ever knew. They ring their bells all the time. Never stop day or night. Then they have processions and carry a picture of the Virgin. St. John's Cathedral is very beautiful. You know Napoleon took away the golden gates at the entrance and coined them to pay his soldiers. So, massive solid silver gates, thirty feet high, had been put in their place.

I did soldier's duty in Malta—guard, you know. There we were given our service medals. They were silver and about as large as a dollar with our names around the edge and the name of the Duke of Cambridge (our leader after the death [?] of Lord Cardigan) in the center. Attached were the English colors and a half-inch wide silver bar on which was the name of every engagement we had been in. My medal had four bars.

On the way to Quebec, where I was ordered, we stopped at Gibraltar where we were given Turkish medals for our service. These were also silver, a star and crescent with a whole punched through the edge in which was run the Turkish colors and tied in a bow-knot. My name was on the outer edge.

As it was reported that every mother who had a son killed in the Crimea could get a donation pension, I sent my medals and two hundred dollars to my mother with a testimony that my two brothers were killed at Balaklava, so she received the pension. If I were in Ireland I could get a small one myself.

After we had been in Quebec nine months, we were given a choice of buying our discharge for \$35 or returning to England to re-enlist when

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<sup>6</sup> The veteran's memory as to the time of Alma was faulty. The Battle of Alma was fought on the heights above the small Alma River on September 20, 1854, the first battle in history in which English and French soldiers fought on the same side. Balaklava was fought on October 25 and Inkerman on November 5.

<sup>7</sup> Florence Nightingale, an English woman interested in hospital work, left her position as head of a hospital in London to go to the front during the Crimean War. She was then thirty-four years of age, and with the thirty-eight nurses whom she took to the Crimea, she started a hospital at Scutari. The undertaking was without precedent in history, but the system started in 1854 has been followed in all later wars.

<sup>8</sup> Sebastopol, a port on the southwestern shore of the Crimea, was attacked because of the great Russian arsenal located there. The port was protected by forts. The defense was in the hands of a very able Russian, Todleben. The little Alma River was a few miles north of Sebastopol while Balaklava and Inkerman were adjacent to that port.

<sup>9</sup> The story of Lord Cardigan's death, which Tommy O'Day heard and which he believed during the rest of his life, was entirely erroneous.

the old regiment was refilled. As I had now been in the army for nine years, eight months and twenty-eight days, I bought my discharge. I was granted my Carbine because it was old, but had to beg for my sword which I afterwards gave to a friend in Canada.

Quebec was full of recruits and I drilled them at target practice for fifty cents a day. When the Fenian Raid<sup>10</sup> broke out, a young fellow, enlisted for five years, offered to give anyone \$1000 to go in his stead but when I said I'd go, he decided he would not pay that much. "Well you don't have to. Just go yourself," I said.

The veteran then related, with a chuckle, that the young soldier's father gave him \$500 and a fine watch to take the son's place. As the service was easy and required only twenty-eight days, O'Day felt that he had made a good bargain, especially since he was able, upon his return, to sell the watch back to the owner for \$100. The young recruit tried to convince Tommy O'Day that he had been paid to serve for the five year period of enlistment. The contract was taken to the Mayor of the city and then to the Governor of the province who decided that the obligation had been met by the service already performed.

O'Day recalled that a private was paid a shilling a day when he was in the service out of which he must provide for himself. This left him only eight cents for spending money. If a soldier lost a spur, a belt, or any other article he had to pay for it and his pay was accordingly cut two cents. Drinking was severely punished. First offense meant twenty-eight days in the guard house; the second, meant a regimental court martial; the third, twenty lashes with a "cat o' nine tails" and two years imprisonment. "For all that," the Irish soldier added, "there was a lot of drinking, but they were 'sly' about getting caught."

From Quebec, ex-cavalryman John Thomas O'Day went to Buffalo, New York, then to Columbus, Ohio, next to Cincinnati, and on to Bellevue, Kentucky. There, for a time, he stripped willows to be used in basket making. Later he worked on a farm near Carrollton, Kentucky. Coming to Vevay, Indiana, he obtained work on the turnpike road that was under construction from that town to Moorefield. His job consisted of rock-breaking, a kind of work which he had

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<sup>10</sup> The Fenian Raid into Canada was planned by the Fenian Brotherhood who used cities in the United States as centers of activity. The Raid occurred in 1866, when 1200 Fenians crossed the Niagara River into Canada above Buffalo, occupied a fort and defeated a force of Canadians. Veteran O'Day lived in Canada about ten years before coming to the United States.

performed when a boy in Dublin. After the road was finished Tommy settled down as a tenant on the farm of John Bakes on Indian Creek. One of the persons to whom the veteran would talk was Mr. Bakes, and through him the stories of Mr. O'Day's earlier experiences leaked out. He took out naturalization papers, and when thirty-six years of age (1869), he married the widow Hines who was the mother of several children by her first husband. She died more than thirty years before Mr. O'Day. Three children were born of this marriage. They are Mrs. Clarence Hollcraft, Mrs. Aleck Locke, and Eugene O'Day, all of whom live on farms in Switzerland County.

The ex-cavalryman of the Crimean War lived to be ninety-three and died from a stroke of paralysis in 1926. He kept his faculties fairly well to the last. To those who knew him in his old age, he seemed a quaint, old character. Many of the stories related about his early experiences were hard to verify. Some believed them, while others doubted their truth. Some things were left unsettled. It remained a mooted question whether he ever received a Victory Cross. A tradition grew up that Queen Victoria herself pinned one on him. Since he did not mention it in his interview with Mrs. Danner, the probability is that the story was fictitious. If true the cross had to be bestowed when the soldier was on his way from the island of Malta in the Mediterranean to Quebec in Canada.<sup>11</sup>

Always a far-off event gains vividness when it can be brought closer through linking it with some one who had a part in it or who saw or knew some participant. Thus through modest and retiring old John Thomas O'Day, many people in Switzerland County were brought in imagination within sound of the roaring of the guns when the Light Brigade charged "into the jaws of death," while

Cannon to the right of them,  
Cannon to the left of them,  
Cannon in front of them  
Volleyed and thundered;  
Stormed at with shot and shell

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to the interview recorded and preserved by Mrs. A. V. Danner, President of the Switzerland County Historical Society, the writer obtained information from Mrs. Clarence Hollcraft, Mr. O'Day's daughter; and from Mrs. Carrie L. Griffith of Madison, Indiana, at the home of whose father the veteran often stayed when working on the Moorefield road which ran through the Griffith farm.

Boldly they rode and well,  
Into the jaws of death,  
Into the mouth of Hell  
Rode the six hundred.

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<sup>12</sup> One story has it that the old cavalryman once said that he supposed the English King was blood kin to the Turkish Sultan and felt that he had to help him. The "why" of it all was remote enough from the Irish soldier's mind, which reminds one of Southey's lines in the poem, "The Battle of Blenheim":

"It was the English," Kaspar cried,  
"Who put the French to rout;  
But what they fought each other for  
I could not well make out.  
But everybody said," quoth he,  
"That 'twas a famous victory."