

*Zee Edgell*

## MY FATHER AND THE CONFEDERATE SOLDIER

In those days? Oh, then we lived in the bush near Manatee Lagoon, at the back of beyond, so I think of it now. We had a pond, fruit trees too, pineapples, coconuts, bananas, and what not. Did farming, at least my father did. Yes, I suppose it was peaceful and quiet, except for snakes and the like, until the Confederate Soldiers came. But I prefer it here at the Belize Town Hotel. When ships arrive, people come and go asking me for this and about that, like you are doing now. I see the latest in fashionable things and hear what's happening in foreign parts, like the end of the war in the States. The guests are not always to my liking, but I know how to take the good with bad.

I have a room in the servants' yard along Duck Lane at the back of the hotel. It's small and noisy. hot, too, during the rainy season, but I prefer it to the bush where I lived as a girl with my father. He's dead now, of course, God rest his soul, died before my grandfather did. You'd think my grandfather would've died first seeing that he had suffered beatings and suchlike when he was a slave before my father was born, and he was forever complaining about one ailment or another. Of course, he couldn't do much work about the farm, but my father never seemed to mind.

Whenever I used to ask my father why Grandad didn't give us more of a hand, my father would say, "His hands are worn out from squaring mahogany logs on the Haulover Creek." At other times my father would say, "Let him lie there all day if he wants to, he's probably thinking of his brother hung, then cut up into pieces and burnt as he was."

Of course, my father's answers were not always the same. Sometimes he'd say that grandfather was thinking of his friend who'd been sold down the river, or about my grandmother who had been crippled by the whip, then worked to death in somebody's kitchen. I didn't know what to make of those stories, but I decided then and there that if ever I had children I wouldn't tell them those stories. Gave me nightmares they did. Sometimes they were so sad, I cried so much I could hardly see. Then my father would say, "You're so wa-wa, but what can I expect from a girl-child?" He never said so but I believe that my father wished I had been born a boy.

My mother? Oh, she died a few days after I was born. She was buried out there in the bush. I've always meant to go back to Manatee, to Gale's Point, to look for her grave, but I never have done. It is strange, I agree, when there is no one to hold me back, not now anyway. But all the graves there are covered with grass and high bush.

But all that was a long time ago and I don't think of it much except that as I grow older, not that I am old, but you know what I mean, memories come upon me when I am not thinking about my father at all, like yesterday. There I was in the kitchen getting the breakfast trays ready for the guests when I looked out the window for some reason or other, and instead of the old barrack rooms back there I see instead my father standing in the door of our house in the clearing, looking towards the trailhead where that Confederate soldier stood, a gun in his hand.

Our house was almost like a shack, you know, but of course I didn't think so then. It was my home, the only one I knew. There weren't any grand houses in the bush except for that of the Confederate soldier who lived on ten thousand or more acres or so my grandfather said, but I had never seen the house and as was my way then, I didn't really give my grandfather's words much credit. Me? Oh, I slept in a lean-to attached to the kitchen and father and grandfather slept in hammocks in the big room. There wasn't much to speak of in it. It had a dirt floor, and a thatched roof which I didn't care for at all. Snakes and scorpions could hide in the thatch and sometimes did in other people's houses but not in ours for father, until he died, kept it clear of anything like that.

I kept the dirt floor and the outside clearing swept and Granddad, when he was in the mood, which was rare as I've said, would help make sure that not a blade of grass survived in the clearing encircling our house. We were not a careless set of people like some I could name. We caught fishes in the lagoon, hunted for game, cooked, cleaned and

grew ground food on our farm, washed our clothes and so on. That took up most of the day and part of the night, too.

Money? My grandfather didn't much like it, but sometimes my father hired himself out to the war families from America who were trying to make plantations, like the Confederate soldier I was telling you about. The most of them didn't succeed here, as I hardly need to tell you. As far as I could understand it, they seemed to get angrier by the day as they saw their efforts come to nothing, again and again.

Everything about the country seemed to make them extremely angry. But like grandfather said, "They were slave owners in their own country, and no kin of mine will ever be a slave again." I wondered at grandfather when he said that. After all, as far as I was concerned, a dollar was a dollar, and there were so many things we needed to buy in Belize Town. Our clothing was extremely ragged, and patched in every possible place and when we had a little money, I was sometimes able to persuade my father to buy enough cloth for me to make us new clothing.

My father and Grandad never went many miles from our farm, and, and except for rare occasions, they didn't visit the little nearby settlements. Lonely? I didn't consider it so then. It must have been. This is probably the reason I was so glad, at first, when the Confederate families started settling in our area. People called all the Confederate men soldiers, even though they didn't always wear a uniform. But even when a lot of the land all around was bought by two or so Confederate families, I never really had much contact with them. They were not a very friendly set of people, quick to use clubs, cut-glasses, and deadly weapons if you so much as looked at them the wrong way, or so grandfather said, but my grandfather had a fighting nature, and was quick to anger himself, so I took most of his sayings with a grain of salt. But these are some of the things which caused my heart to beat so fast the day I saw the Confederate soldier enter the clearing.

Of course, by now I had become almost used to seeing the white faces of the Confederate families at a distance, but I had not yet met any of them up close. The soldier? Oh, he was not very tall, and not wearing a uniform, as I recall. His mouth was turned down in the midst of a gray beard. He wore his jacket, a white shirt, with a small collar, and a black string tie...as far as I remember, and good trousers of course. But as I said, we called all the men soldiers, for that's what they said they mostly were. In any case, his face looked as though he smelled something sour in our clearing, and he narrowed his

eyes when he saw my father. The sun? Well, it could have been against the sun, I grant you that, which always did seem too bright, and too hot, to me in those days. I very much doubt it, however, although as I said, it was a long time ago.

No, I can't remember what day it was, nor the month, nor the year. Before time, out in the bush, it didn't matter what day or year it was, or so it seemed to me. My father and grandfather usually knew when the season was going to change by looking at the sky and the trees, and by wetting a finger and holding it up to the breeze. They could tell you all sorts of things like when the rainy season would start and the dry begin, what time of day or night special fishes would be in the lagoon, or when it was best to cut certain trees or plant certain foods, that kind of thing

So as I said, there I was returning from the well carrying two pails of water, one in each hand, when I saw my father, his face alarmed, then angry, disappear from the door of our house, only to return with his gun in his hand, staring at the soldier standing on the path through high bush and trees. My father had his head cocked to one side as though he was listening to something. I set the pails on the ground and went into the house through the back door.

I don't know how old I was but I was still what people called a girl, you know, not old enough to be a young lady or anything of that nature. My father made me dress like a boy and my hair was cropped close to my head as there were no women near at hand to do any plaiting. To tell you the truth I seldom remembered I was a girl for I was tall for my age and strong.

But I remembered sometimes, for my father wouldn't let me lift anything over heavy, and I couldn't go wandering by myself along the bush paths or near the lagoon like I sometimes wanted to do. I tried it once but my father gave me such a beating I never really had the courage to leave the clearing alone again until he and grandfather were dead. If my father hadn't gotten the rotting sickness, which I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy believe me, I suppose I'd be there still where I was until long past what people called the marriageable age.

This hotel? Oh, I've been here now for about five years and I live in hope of marrying some strong man like my father. There are many good men around this town, or so people tell me. My one or two friends sometimes point them out to me. But I've never

met a one to match my father. Dealing with him and grandfather day in and day out, as I did for so many years, was not easy believe me for they did not like too much foolish talk. Of course, I was a young girl, and maybe I was lonely as you said. I think I must really have been, for sometimes he and grandfather, when he was not laid low with bad remembering, would listen to my chattering, not saying much, just nodding or grumbling until they'd had enough. Then they'd remind me of a chore I had to do like screwing the cashew seeds off the fruit or getting the cashews ready for stewing if we had a little sugar, or something like that. But whenever I was cut short and sent to bed to stop me talking or anything like that, I always felt offended, dismissed, rejected, or some other sad feeling. Silly isn't it, but I still feel that way sometimes.

I'd make all sorts of secret vows not to speak to them for days other than the usual necessary daily conversation, which I managed to do sometimes, believe it or not. But after a while there they'd be again, father and grandfather, smoking pipes both of them, sitting on the three-legged stools in the clearing, looking at me as though I'd just said something they hadn't heard, and before I knew what was happening I'd be talking to them and then the same thing would happen all over again.

Well, as I said, I lived with two strong men who had terrible memories about the old life about which I knew so little. The men I've met so far aren't like my father and grandfather, and when I am myself, which I can't help being, of course, after some time, I notice that I seem to say, maybe even do things, that are not pleasing to the men. Perhaps it's my voice or my looks or something.

Still, I did get this job and now I'm quite settled, inside myself, I mean, except when the hot season arrives, like it seems to have done today, and I am washing mangoes for the bowl on the dining room table, or someone like you reminds me by mentioning Manatee Lagoon or asks me about the land we used to own in the bush. I think of the trees, bowed down with green fruit about this time, which surrounded our clearing.

The day when the Confederate soldier entered our clearing, I'd been carrying the buckets of water and looking at the huge trees near our well, trying to spot a mango that had turned, for I liked eating half-green mangoes. So that's how I remember it must have been the mango season that day when I dropped the buckets of water and rushed past my father and went to my grandfather who was asleep on his cot underneath the room

window. I told him what was happening outside. He sat up and pushed the wooden shutter slightly ajar.

What happened next? Oh, by this time, my father and the Confederate soldier stood quite close to each other in the clearing. At first their voices were low but soon they were shouting at each other and my grandfather joined in, calling through the window, "That's right, that's right, you tell him." My father didn't want to work for the Confederate soldier every day during every season because he had his own place to tend, and he had us at home to worry about as I've said.

Father told the Confederate soldier that he wasn't going to work for starvation wages from before sun-up to after sun down day after day. He told the Confederate soldier about every bad treatment he had received from him. You won't believe this but he sounded exactly like grandfather, even his voice. What else? Oh, after that things went from bad to worse, for when my father turned away from the Confederate soldier, and started walking back to the house, the Confederate soldier seemed to go almost crazy.

He aimed the gun and fired, but there was no discharge, otherwise one or other of them would have killed. My father managed to get the gun away from the soldier in the end, pushing him away from of the house, and out of the clearing. The soldier was shouting at him to the very last. What else did he say? Oh, I can scarcely remember from this distance of time, but it was something about if you give a native a coconut and a handful of rice all idea of work goes out of his head, that my father was lazy and could not be depended upon, was not a responsible person, many silly, untruthful things like that. For I was a witness to how hard my father worked, as I've been telling you. I think most of those old soldiers are gone now.

There was something in the papers long ago, so I was told, reporting on their behavior to people living in the bush like we used to do.

Do I want to sell the land? Oh, it's nothing to do with me now, you know. Oh, no, I am sorry to have wasted your time like this. You've come to the wrong person if you are hoping to buy that piece of land. My father didn't leave the farm to me you know. Well, he wouldn't, would he? He left it to his grandnephew. I can give you his name if you wish. A very nice man, very grateful to my father for his good fortune, so unexpected, too, as he always says. I receive a little consideration from him every now and again. The first year

he paddled a dorey full of mangoes from Manatee Lagoon to the market here in Belize City, and gave me some of the profits. He's not too well of late, so he might be willing to sell, although he has sons of his own. All you have to do is to visit Manatee Lagoon and ask for him. Good Afternoon, to you, too. I am glad we are no more strangers.