



"The Spy" (1823) by New York painter, not to mention author and historian, William Dunlap (1766-1839), and which presents a contemporary stage adaptation of a scene from James Fenimore Cooper's novel; with, from left to right, Frances Wharton (love interest of Dunwoodie), Sarah Wharton (her loyalist sister), Caesar (the old and devoted family servant), Capt. Henry Wharton (brother of the girls and disguised loyalist officer), Maj. Peyton Dunwoodie (the American cavalryman who captures Wharton but who yet treats the latter most graciously; being in love as he is with Wharton's sister), Miss Jeanette Peyton (Virginia relative of the Whartons), and Mr. Wharton (the pro-British but carefully diplomatic father.)¹

THE AMERICAN CAVALRYMAN IN JAMES FENIMORE COOPER'S "THE SPY"

While we must be careful to take much of Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy: a Tale of Neutral Ground* (1821) as history with a grain of salt; still the emotional atmosphere he breathes into his prose, while undeniably larger than life, cannot but have an authentic basis; inasmuch as it is possible for a reader to palpably imbibe that spirit, and would seem to have emanated as much from real and living persons as much as Cooper's imagination. As well the novel delves as deeply, if at times with flamboyant exaggeration, as any other written portrait that has come down to us (whether fictional or non-fictional) in revealing the respective psychologies of combatant and non-combatant rebels and loyalists in a believable and convincing manner.

It will or might be further of curious notice to some Legion scholars or enthusiasts that the depiction of the Virginia light horsemen in his story, and which takes place in Westchester County, N.Y, about 1778, is ostensibly drawn from and modeled on Lee's Legion. One reason for surmising this is the apparent resemblance of Cooper's Maj.

¹ For more on this picture, see the Fenimore Art Museum at:
http://www.fenimoreartmuseum.org/files/fenimore/collections/fine_folk_art/exhibit1/e10091a.htm

Peyton Duwoodie to Henry Lee and or one of Lee's officers; at least more resembling than, say, other well known Virginia cavalry leaders like the comparatively mild and less volatile in temper Theodorick Bland, George Baylor, or for that matter William Washington.

CHAPTER VII

The game's afoot;
Follow your spirit.
--SHAKESPEARE.

The rough and unimproved face of the country, the frequency of covers, together with the great distance from their own country, and the facilities afforded them for rapid movements to the different points of the war, by the undisputed command of the ocean, had united to deter the English from employing a heavy force in cavalry, in their early efforts to subdue the revolted colonies.

Only one regiment of regular horse was sent from the mother country, during the struggle [actually, there were two sent -- the 16th and 17th Light Dragoons]. But legions and independent corps were formed in different places, as it best accorded with the views of the royal commanders, or suited the exigency of the times. These were not unfrequently composed of men raised in the colonies, and at other times drafts were had from the regiments of the line, and the soldiers were made to lay aside the musket and bayonet, and taught to wield the saber and carbine. One particular body of the subsidiary troops was included in this arrangement, and the Hessian yagers were transformed into a corps of heavy and inactive horse.

Opposed to them were the hardiest spirits of America. Most of the cavalry regiments of the continental army were led and officered by gentlemen from the South. The high and haughty courage of the commanders had communicated itself to the privates, who were men selected with care and great attention to the service they were intended to perform.

While the British were confined to their empty conquests in the possession of a few of the larger towns, or marched through counties that were swept of everything like military supplies, the light troops of their enemies had the range of the whole interior.

The sufferings of the line of the American army were great beyond example; but possessing the power, and feeling themselves engaged in a cause which justified severity, the cavalry officers were vigilant in providing for their wants, and the horse were well mounted, well fed, and consequently eminently effective. Perhaps the world could not furnish more brave, enterprising, and resistless corps of light cavalry, than a few that were in the continental service at the time of which we write...

CHAPTER VIII

...Dunwoodie had lingered in front of the cottage, after he paid his parting compliments, with an unwillingness to return, that he thought proceeded from his solicitude for his wounded friends. The heart which has not become callous, soon sickens with the glory that has been purchased with a waste of human life. Peyton Dunwoodie, left to himself, and no longer excited by the visions which youthful ardor had kept before him throughout the day, began to feel there were other ties than those which bound the soldier within the rigid rules of honor. He did not waver in his duty, yet he felt how strong was the temptation. His blood had ceased to flow with the impulse created by the battle. The stern expression of his eye gradually gave place to a look of softness; and his reflections on the victory brought with them no satisfaction that compensated for the sacrifices by which it had been purchased. While turning his last lingering gaze on the Locusts [home of the Wharton's], he remembered only that it contained all that he most valued. The friend of his youth was a prisoner [loyalist Capt. Henry Wharton], under circumstances that endangered both life and honor. The gentle companion of his toils, who could throw around the rude enjoyments of a soldier [Capt. Singleton, a youthful American cavalry officer who had been severely wounded] the graceful mildness of peace, lay a bleeding victim to his success. The image of the maid [Frances Wharton] who had held, during the day, a disputed sovereignty in his bosom, again rose to his view with a loveliness that banished her rival, glory, from his mind...

For a full .txt version of *The Spy*, see:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/9845/pg9845.txt>

William Thomas Sherman

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