



### **WILLIAM GILMORE SIMMS' *YEMASSEE* (1835): An excerpt.**

One is hard put now to make apologies for William Gilmore Simms' (1806-1870) racism as an ante-bellum, pro-slavery southerner. Yet his skill and virtue as a thoughtful and erudite author otherwise will redeem him nevertheless to those who can appreciate such gifts. In addition, had he the hindsight we have at a later point in history, it is no strain to envision his finally getting around to changing his tune. Because he was at heart a kind and gracious man, not above self-criticism; who combined a very earthy and visceral sensibility with, by contrast, a profound seeking of excellence and the sublime. Looking back himself on his career in his later years, he came to express the view, in reference to his writings, that he would have done and penned some things differently than he did, and which second thoughts it is not unthinkable he would or might have applied to his views on political and controversial subjects as well.

In addition to novels, Simms authored histories, including biographies on Francis Marion and Nathanael Greene, as well not a little poetry; as an example of the latter, his "Atalantis: A Story of the Sea" (1832) is a gripping and imaginative, if admittedly sometimes desultory and chaotic, opus deserving of more recognition than it has received. Yet it is his novels and as the southern counterpart of James Fenimore Cooper, that he is best remembered, and rightly so. Like most 19th century novelists (whether American or European), he tends to be excessively verbose; expressing in a few pages what might just as soon have been said in an effectively worded paragraph or two. However, in fairness to such novelists, it is important to remember that such prolixity not infrequently stemmed from the insistence of publishers for longer works; claiming they needed to meet public demand. Whether such was actually public demand, or else motivated by a desire to trivialize literature in the interest of pandering to (perceived) popular dullness and a crude desire for size may be open to question. What ever the real reason, reading Simms' novels is sometimes not unlike making one's way through a flooded Carolina swamp; that is to say be warned of turgid, as in verbose, obstructions and digressive sink holes that occur up in the course of the narrative journey. But if you are patient, you will before long come upon the solid land you're seeking. For myself, most entertaining are his Revolutionary war novels, particularly *The Forayers* (1855) and *Eutaw* (1856), and which, incidentally, properly abridged and edited would make good movies if anyone ever got around to doing such a thing. The *full* list of these, in their fictional chronological sequence, are:

- \* *The Cassique of Kiawah, a Colonial Romance* (1859) -- While not actually set in the Revolutionary war, lays the groundwork and backdrop for the following that are.
- \* *Joscelyn, A Tale of the Revolution* (1867)
- \* *The Partisan, A Tale of the Revolution* (1835)
- \* *Mellichampe, A Legend of the Santee* (1836)
- \* *Katherine Walton, or The Rebel of Dorchester* (1850)
- \* *The Scout* (aka as *The Kinsman*), or *Black Riders of the Congaree* (1841)
- \* *The Forayers, or The Raid of the Dog-Days* (1855)
- \* *Eutaw, A Sequel to the Forayers* (1856)
- \* *Woodcraft* (aka *The Sword and the Distaff*), or *Hawks About the Dovecoat* (1852, 1854)

Granted, the corniness of Simms' characters, dialogue, and plot situations, like those of the worthy Cooper, are sometimes enough to elicit an unintended laugh or groan. Yet also like Cooper's, his writings *more* frequently display a uncommon knack for depicting the genuinely tender and sentimental;<sup>1</sup> as well as being plentiful in color; inventive in their wording; moving in descriptions, and no little ingenious in eliciting poetry from odd and mundane circumstances. And yet possibly Simms greatest strength is in delivering up exciting action sequences, and no writer yet has yet to excel him in "blood and thunder" and the "rip-roaring." As a sample of this latter, the following comes from chapter XXXIV of *Yemassee* (1835); which tells the tragic tale of the revolt of South Carolina's indigenous natives in the early 18th century (1715-1717).

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*"And war is the great Moloch; for his feast,  
Gather the human victims he requires,  
With an unglutted appetite. He makes  
Earth his grand table, spread with winding-sheets,  
Man his attendant, who, with madness fit,  
Serves his own brother up, nor heeds the prayer,  
Groaned by a kindred nature, for reprieve."*

BLOOD makes the taste for blood -- we teach the hound to hunt the victim, for whose entrails he acquires an appetite. We acquire such tastes ourselves from like indulgences. There is a sort of intoxicating restlessness in crime that seldom suffers it to stop at a solitary excess. It craves repetition -- and the relish so expands with indulgence, that exaggeration becomes essential to make it a stimulant. Until we have created this appetite, we sicken at its bare contemplation. But once created, it is impatient of employ, and it is wonderful to note its progress. Thus, the young Nero wept when first called upon to sign the warrant commanding the execution of a criminal. But the ice once broken, he never suffered it to close again. Murder was his companion -- blood his banquet -- his chief stimulant licentiousness -- horrible licentiousness. He had found out a new luxury.

The philosophy which teaches this is common to experience all the world over. It was not unknown to the Yemassee. Distrusting the strength of their hostility to the English, the chief instigators of the proposed insurrection, as we have seen deemed it necessary to appeal to this appetite, along with a native superstition. Their battle-god called for a victim, and the prophet promulgated the decree. A chosen band of warriors was despatched [sic] to secure a white man; and in subjecting him to the fire-torture, the Yemassee were to feel the provocation of that thirsting impulse which craves a continual renewal of its stimulating indulgence. Perhaps one of the most natural and necessary agents of man, in his progress through life, is the desire to destroy. It is this which subjects the enemy -- it is this that prompts him to adventure -- which enables him to contend with danger, and to flout at death -- which carries him into the interminable forests, and impels the ingenuity into exercise, which furnishes him with a weapon to contend with its savage possessors. It is not surprising, if prompted by dangerous influences, in our ignorance, we pamper this natural agent into a disease, which preys at length upon ourselves.

The party despatched for this victim had been successful. The peculiar cry was heard indicating their success; and as it rung through the wide area, the crowd gave way and parted for the new comers, who were hailed with a degree of satisfaction, extravagant enough, unless we consider the importance generally attached to their enterprise. On their procuring this victim alive, depended their hope of victory in the approaching conflict. Such was the prediction of the prophet -- such the decree of their god of war -- and for the due celebration of this terrible sacrifice, the preparatory ceremonies had been delayed.

They were delayed no longer. With shrill cries and the most savage contortions, not to say convulsions of body, the assembled multitude hailed the entree of the detachment sent forth upon this expedition. They had been eminently successful; having taken their captive, without themselves losing a drop of blood. Upon this, the prediction had founded their success.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter XX from *Yemassee* being one offhand and good instance of such.

Not so the prisoner. Though unarmed he had fought desperately, and his enemies were compelled to wound in order to secure him. He was only overcome by numbers, and the sheer physical weight of their crowding bodies.

They dragged him into the ring, the war-dance all the time going on around him. From the cove, close at hand, in which he lay concealed, Harrison [the novel's white hero, an Englishman] could distinguish, at intervals, the features of the captive. He knew him at a glance, as a poor labourer, named Macnamara, an Irishman, who had gone jobbing about, in various ways, throughout the settlement. He was a fine-looking, fresh, muscular man -- not more than thirty -- and sustaining well, amid that fierce assemblage, surrounded with foes, and threatened with a torture to which European ingenuity could not often attain, unless in the Inquisitorial dungeons, the fearless character, which is a distinguishing feature with his countrymen. His long, black hair, deeply saturated and matted with his blood, which oozed out from sundry bludgeon-wounds upon the head, was wildly distributed in masses over his face and forehead. His full, round cheeks, were marked by knife-wounds, also the result of his fierce defence against his captors. His hands were bound, but his tongue was unfettered; and as they danced and howled about him, his eye gleamed forth in fury and derision, while his words were those of defiance and contempt.

“Ay -- screech and scream, ye red devils -- ye'd be after seeing how a jontleman would burn in the fire, would ye, for your idification and delight. But its not Tedd Macnamara, that your fires and your arrows will scare, ye devils; so begin, boys, as soon as ye've a mind to, and don't be too dilicate in your doings.”

He spoke a language, so far as they understood it, perfectly congenial with their notion of what should become a warrior. His fearless contempt of death, his haughty defiance of their skill in the arts of torture -- his insolent abuse -- were all so much in his favour. They were proofs of the true brave, and they found, under the bias of their habits and education, an added pleasure in the belief, that he would stand well the torture, and afford them a protracted enjoyment of it. His execrations, poured forth freely as they forced him into the area, were equivalent to one of their own death-songs, and they regarded it as his.

He was not so easily compelled in the required direction. Unable in any other way to oppose them, he gave them as much trouble as he could, and in no way sought to promote his locomotion. This was good policy, perhaps, for this passive resistance -- the most annoying of all its forms, -- was not unlikely to bring about an impatient blow, which might save him from the torture. In another case, such might have been the result of the course taken by Macnamara; but now, the prophecy was the object, and though roughly handled enough, his captors yet forbore any excessive violence. Under a shower of kicks, cuffs, and blows from every quarter, the poor fellow, still cursing them to the last, hissing at and spitting upon them, was forced to a tree; and in a few moments tightly lashed back against it. A thick cord secured him around the body to its overgrown trunk, while his hands, forced up in a direct line above his head, were fastened to the tree with withes -- the two palms turned outwards, nearly meeting, and so well corded as to be perfectly immovable.

A cold chill ran through all the veins of Harrison and he grasped his knife with a clutch as tenacious as that of his fast-clinched teeth, while he looked, from his place of concealment, upon these dreadful preparations for the Indian torture. The captive was seemingly less sensible of its terrors. All the while, with a tongue that seemed determined to supply, so far as it might, the forced inactivity of all other members, he shouted forth his scorn and execrations.

“The pale-face will sing his death-song,” -- in his own language cried a young warrior.

“Ay, ye miserable red nagers, -- ye don't frighten Tedd Macnamara now so aisily,” he replied, though without comprehending what they said, yet complying as it were with their demand; for his shout was now a scream, and his words were those of exulting superiority.

“It aint your bows and your arrows, ye nagers, nor your knives, nor your hatchets, that’s going to make Teddy beg your pardon, and ax for your mercies. I don’t care for your knives, and your hatchets, at all at all, ye red divils. Not I -- by my faith, and my own ould father, that was Teddy before me.”

They took him at his word, and their preparations were soon made for the torture. A hundred torches of the gummy pine were placed to kindle in a neighbouring fire -- a hundred old women stood ready to employ them. These were to be applied as a sort of cauterization, to the arrow and knife-wounds which the more youthful savages were expected, in their sports, to inflict. It was upon their captives in this manner, that the youth of the nation was practised [sic]. It was in this school that the boys were prepared to become men -- to inflict pain as well as to submit to it. To these two classes, -- for this was one of the peculiar features of the Indian torture, -- the fire-sacrifice, in its initial penalties, was commonly assigned; and both of them were ready at hand to commence it. How beat the heart of Harrison with conflicting emotions, in the shelter of the adjacent bush, as he surveyed each step in the prosecution of these horrors.

They began. A dozen youth, none over sixteen, came forward and ranged themselves in front of the prisoner.

“And what for do ye face me down after that sort, ye little red nagers?” cried the sanguine prisoner.

They answered him with a whoop -- a single shriek -- and the face paled then, with that mimicry of war, of the man, who had been fearless throughout the real strife, and amid the many terrors which preceded it. The whoop was followed by a simultaneous discharge of all their arrows, aimed, as would appear from the result, at those portions of his person which were not vital.

This was the common exercise, and their adroitness was wonderful. They placed the shaft where they pleased. Thus, the arrow of one penetrated one palm, while that of another, almost at the same instant, was driven deep into the other. One cheek was grazed by a third, while a fourth scarified the opposite. A blunted shaft struck him full in the mouth, and arrested, in the middle his usual execration -- “You bloody red nagers,” and there never were fingers of a hand so evenly separated one from the other, as those of Macnamara, by the admirably-aimed arrows of those embryo warriors. But the endurance of the captive was proof against all their torture; and while every member of his person attested the felicity of their aim, he still continued to shout his abuse, not only to his immediate assailants, but to the old warriors, and the assembled multitude, gathering around, and looking composedly on -- now approving this or that peculiar hit, and encouraging the young beginner with a cheer. He stood all, with the most unflinching fortitude, and a courage that, extorting their freest admiration, was quite as much the subject of cheer with the warriors as were the arrow-shots which sometimes provoked its exhibition.

At length, throwing aside the one instrument, they came forward with the tomahawk. They were far more cautious with this fatal weapon, for, as their present object was not less the prolonging of their own exercises than of the prisoner’s tortures, it was their wish to avoid wounding fatally or even severely. Their chief delight was in stinging the captive into an exhibition of imbecile and fruitless anger, or terrifying him into ludicrous apprehensions. They had no hope of the latter source of amusement from the firmness of the victim before them; and to rouse his impotent rage, was the study in their thought.

With words of mutual encouragement, and boasting, garrulously enough, each of his superior skill, they strove to rival one another in the nicety of their aim and execution. The chief object was barely to miss the part at which they aimed. One planted the tomahawk in the tree so directly over the head of his captive, as to divide the huge tuft of hair which grew massively in that quarter; and great was their exultation and loud their laughter, when the head thus jeoparded, very naturally, under the momentary impulse, was writhed about from the stroke, just at the moment when another aimed to lie on one side of his cheek, clove the ear which it would have barely escaped had the captive continued immovable. Bleeding and suffering as he must have been with such infliction, not a solitary groan however escaped him. The stout-hearted Irishman continued to defy and to denounce his tormentors in language which, if only partially comprehended by his enemies, was yet illustrated with sufficient animation by the fierce light gleaming from his eye with a blaze like that of madness, and in the unblenching firmness of his cheek.

“And what for do ye howl, ye red-skinned divils, as if ye never seed a jontleman in your born days before? Be aisy, now, and shoot away with your piinted sticks, ye nagers, -- shoot away and be cursed to ye; sure it isn’t Tedd Macnamara that’s afeard of what ye can do, ye divils. If it’s the fun ye’re after now, honeys, -- the sport that’s something like -- why, put your knife over this thong, and help this dilicate little fist to one of the bit shilalahs yonder. Do now, pretty crathers, do -- and see what fun will come out of it. Ye’ll not be after loving it at all at all, I’m a thinking, ye monkeys, and ye alligators, and ye red nagers, and them’s the best names for ye, ye ragamuffin divils that ye are.”

It happened, however, as it would seem in compliance with a part of one of his demands, that one of the tomahawks, thrown so as to rest between the two uplifted palms of the captive, fell short, and striking the hide, a few inches below, which fastened his wrists to the tree, entirely separated it, and gave freedom to his arms. Though still incapable of any effort for his release, as the thongs tightly girdled his body, and were connected on the other side of the tree, the fearless sufferer, with his emancipated fingers, proceeded to pluck from his hands, amid a shower of darts, the arrows which had penetrated them deeply. These with a shout of defiance, he hurled back upon his assailants, they answering in similar style with another shout and a new discharge of arrows, which penetrated his person in every direction, inflicting the greatest pain, though carefully avoiding any vital region. And now, as if impatient of their forbearance, the boys were made to give way, and each armed with her hissing and resinous torch, the old women approached, howling and dancing, with shrill voices and an action of body frightfully demoniac. One after another they rushed up to the prisoner, and with fiendish fervour, thrust the blazing torches to his shrinking body, wherever a knife, an arrow, or a tomahawk had left a wound. The torture of this infliction greatly exceeded all to which he had been previously subjected; and with a howl, the unavoidable acknowledgment forced from nature by the extremity of pain, scarcely less horrible than that which they unitedly sent up around him, the captive dashed out his hands, and grasping one of the most forward among his unsexed tormentors, he firmly held her with one hand, while with the other he possessed himself of the blazing torch she bore. Hurling her backward, in the next moment, among the crowd of his enemies, with a resolution from despair, he applied the torch to the thongs which bound him to the tree, and while his garments shrivelled and flamed, and while the flesh blistered and burned with the terrible application, resolute as desperate, he maintained it on the spot, until the withes crackled, blazed, and separated.

His limbs were free -- a convulsion of joy actually rushed through his heart, and he shouted with a new tone, the result of a new and unimagined sensation. He leaped forward, and though the flames grasped and gathered in a thick volume, rushing from his waist to his extremities, completely enveloping him in their embrace, they offered no obstacle to the fresh impulse which possessed him. He bounded onward, with that over-head-and-heel evolution which is called the somerset [somersault], and which carried him, a broad column of fire, into the very thickest of the crowd. They gave way to him on every side -- they shrunk from that living flame, which mingled the power of the imperial element with the will of its superior, man. Panic-stricken for a few moments at the novel spectacle, they shrunk away on either hand before the blazing body, and offered no obstacle to his flight.

But the old warriors now took up the matter. They had suffered the game to go on as was their usage, for the tutoring of the youthful savage in those arts which are to be the employment of his life. But their own appetite now gave them speed, and they soon gathered upon the heels of the fugitive. Fortunately, he was still vigorous, and his hurts were those only of the flesh. His tortures only stimulated him into a daring disregard of any fate which might follow, and, looking once over his shoulder, and with a halloo not unlike their own whoop, Macnamara bounded forward directly upon the coppice which concealed Harrison. The latter saw his danger from this approach, but it was too late to retreat. He drew his knife and kept close to the cover of the fallen tree alongside of which he had laid himself down. Had the flying Macnamara seen this tree so as to have avoided it, Harrison might still have maintained his concealment. But the fugitive, unhappily, looked out for no such obstruction. He thought only of flight, and his legs were exercised at the expense of his eyes. A long-extended branch, shooting from the tree, interposed, and he saw it not. His feet were suddenly entangled, and he fell between the arm and the trunk of the tree. Before he could rise or recover, his pursuers were upon him. He had half gained his feet, and one of his hands, in promoting this object, rested upon the tree itself, on the opposite side of which Harrison lay quiet, while the head of Macnamara was just rising above it. At that moment a tall chief of the Seratees, with a huge club, dashed

the now visible skull down upon the trunk. The blow was fatal -- the victim uttered not even a groan, and the spattering brains were driven wide, and into the upturned face of Harrison.

There was no more concealment for him after that, and starting to his feet, in another moment his knife was thrust deep into the bosom of the astonished Seratee before he had resumed the swing of his ponderous weapon. The Indian sunk back, with a single cry, upon those who followed him -- half paralyzed, with himself, at the new enemy whom they had conjured up. But their panic was momentary, and the next instant saw fifty of them crowding upon the Englishman. He placed himself against a tree, hopeless, but determined to struggle to the last. But he was surrounded in a moment -- his arms pinioned from behind, and knives from all quarters glittering around him, and aiming at his breast. What might have been his fate under the excitement of the scene and circumstances could well be said; for, already, the brother chief of the Seratee had rushed forward with his uplifted mace, and as he had the distinct claim to revenge, there was no interference. Fortunately, however, for the captive, the blow was stricken aside and intercepted by the huge staff of no less a person than the prophet.

“He is mine -- the ghost of Chaharatee, my brother, is waiting for that of his murderer. I must hang his teeth on my neck,” was the fierce cry, in his own language, of the surviving Seratee, when his blow was thus arrested. But the prophet had his answer in a sense not to be withstood by the superstitious savage.

“Does the prophet speak for himself or for Manneyto? Is Manneyto a woman that we may say, Wherefore thy word to the prophet? Has not Manneyto spoken, and will not the chief obey? Lo! this is our victim, and the words of Manneyto are truth. He hath said one victim -- one English for the sacrifice, -- and but one before we sing the battle-song -- before we go on the war-path of our enemies. Is not his word truth? This blood says it is truth. We may not slay another, but on the red trail of the English. The knife must be drawn and the tomahawk lifted on the ground of the enemy, but the land of Manneyto is holy, save for his sacrifice. Thou must not strike the captive. He is captive to the Yemassee.”

“He is the captive to the brown lynx of Seratee -- is he not under his club?” was the fierce reply.

“Will the Seratee stand up against Manneyto? Hear! That is his voice of thunder, and see, the eye which he sends forth in the lightning!”

Thus confirmed in his words by the solemn auguries to which he referred, and which, just at that moment came, as if in fulfillment and support of his decision, the Seratee obeyed, while all around grew silent and serious. But he insisted that, though compelled to forbear his blood, he was at least his captive. This, too, the prophet denied. The prisoner was made such upon the sacred ground of the Yemassee, and was, therefore, doubly their captive. He was reserved for sacrifice to the Manneyto at the conclusion of their present enterprise, when his doom would add to the solemnity of their thanksgiving for the anticipated victory.

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