

The Fighting Denisons

A Military Instinct that Runs in the Blood of Five Generations

By JAMES GRANVILLE FLEMING

AN INTERESTING incident is related in connection with the coming to Toronto of the founder of the Denison family. The story dates back to the last decade of the eighteenth century and gives one of those pleasant personal touches, which always make good reading, as well as offering a not unimportant contribution to history. Its relation however must be prefaced by a short account of the circumstances under which the family progenitor was led to cross the Atlantic.

Feminine influence playing to a certain extent on a thorough-going British gentleman's love of sport and adventure had a good deal to do with the event. John Denison, great grandfather of the present generation of Denisons and second son of an old Yorkshire family, had married a Miss Taylor of Dovecourt. Miss Taylor was an intimate friend and had been a schoolday companion of a certain Miss Russell, Miss Russell had a brother named Peter and Peter Russell was one of the men whom Governor Simcoe selected to go with him to America to assist in the government of the new province of Upper Canada.

There was a close intimacy between John Denison and his wife and Peter Russell and his sister; so much so that when the Russells decided to go with Colonel Simcoe, they endeavored to induce their friends to accompany them. Mrs. Denison was eager to make the journey and her husband was strongly tempted by the stories of the excellent shooting and fishing that were to be enjoyed in the new world. Besides he realized that as a second son, his share in the family fortunes did not require his presence in England, while opportunities for gaining a position of independence in Canada would be numerous.

Constrained by these causes the forefather of the Canadian Denisons, with his wife and children, sailed from England and presently set foot on the shores of the land that was to be his future home. It was the year 1792 and the country to the west of Montreal was still in a rough and largely unsettled condition. Governor Simcoe with his suite pressed on to Newark at the mouth of the Niagara River, where the seat of

While primarily a Toronto family, the Denisons have been so prominent in the military life of Canada as a whole, that their name is a familiar one in all parts of the country. The story of their establishment in the capital of Upper Canada and their remarkable record of military achievement is unique in national annals. This family sketchably maintains the interest of the series, which reached a high-water mark last month with the publication of the illustrated account of the famous Borden family of Nova Scotia. Next month the subject will be a notable Quebec family.—The Editor.

government was established, but the Denisons did not proceed beyond Kingston, the last settlement of any importance on the road west. Here they took up their residence for two or three years.

At this point in the family history occurred the incident, to which must be traced the establishment of the Denisons in Toronto. That their future residence in Canada hung on a hair was evident, for John Denison had seemingly become pretty tired of the country and had made up his mind to pack up and return to his old home in England. Before doing so he decided to go to Newark there to tell his friends Simcoe and Russell of his intention and bid them farewell.

When the Governor heard of his desire to leave Canada, he expressed regret. Settlers of the Denison type, blessed with means of their own and strong personalities, were few enough and to lose even one of them in those early days was a serious matter. Backed up by Peter Russell he urged John Denison to remain in Canada.

"Come with us" said he, "to the new town which we are going to establish on the north side of the lake. We are going to move the Government over there and build a fine large settlement. We will be all together and life will be more pleasant. Make up your mind to stay and help us build up the new capital of Upper Canada,—the town of Dublin."

"Dublin," exclaimed Denison, "would you expect a Yorkshireman like me to live in a place called Dublin?"

"Well, then," replied the Governor, "you name it for us. There's a bargain. Remain in Canada and we'll change the new capital from Dublin to the name you bestow on it."

"In that case," said Mr. Denison, "Call it York. I said I was going to York and if you will call this new place York, I will be willing to go there and settle."

As is generally known, York was the name which Governor Simcoe selected for the town and, while it was gazetted as having been bestowed in honor of the Duke of York, as a matter of fact it owed its designation to the offer made by the Governor to John Denison. The Yorkshire nomenclature was extended to meet the needs of other points in and around early Toronto. The county of which it became the capital was called York and there was also a York township created. Rivers to east and west of the city, the Humber and the Don, were blessed with good old Yorkshire names and the townships of Whitby, Scarboro, Pickering and Whitechurch all reflected the same origin.

The Denisons moved up the lake from Kingston to York in 1796 and were the first family to be sheltered in Castle Frank. This famous house, built as the official residence of Governor Simcoe was probably never regularly occupied by him. The Denisons remained in it until their own house was ready for occupancy, when they moved into town. In this way, what was destined to become perhaps the most celebrated military family in Canada, took up its residence in Toronto where most of its members have ever since lived.

The genealogical tree of the Denisons, of which sturdy old John Denison formed the trunk, has grown into a wide-branching and flourishing object. But as the tracing out of the family descent even in the case of kings and princes becomes dry enough after one or two generations have been unravelled, there is no intention of going into any detail in describing the expansion of the family. The distinguished Toronto branch of which Colonel George T. Denison is now the head, originated with George



LIEUT.-COLONEL GEORGE TAYLOR DENISON I.,
The First of the Name.

Taylor Denison, the eldest son of John Denison. George Taylor Denison the First, had four sons of whom George Taylor Denison, the Second, was one. He in turn was the father of George Taylor Denison, the Third, the present police magistrate of Toronto, and it is interesting to know that there is a fourth and a fifth representative of the old name, establishing an unusual continuity for a young country like Canada.

Families of distinction in Canada owe their fame to various causes. In the case of the Oslers, it has been due to unusual brain power; in that of the Merediths of London, to exceptional ability in law and finance. Most families have perhaps achieved prominence through their capacity to amass wealth. With the Denisons the distinguishing feature has been a remarkable display of the military spirit. From their cradles up members of the family with but very few exceptions have evidenced a keen love for soldiering and it is as military men, from father to son, that they take rank among the leading families of the Dominion. Eighty years ago they were generally known as the Fighting Denisons.

There has been no campaign since 1812, in which Canadians have taken part, that has not seen one or more of the Denisons in the forefront of the fighting. The first three men who dashed into Fort Erie after its evacuation by the Fenians were Denisons, and it was a Denison who rode ahead of Wolseley's troops into Fort Garry in 1870. In the North West Rebellion of 1885, Denisons figured constantly in despatches, while in the South African War no fewer than six members of the

family were in the field.

At the same time it must not be overlooked that the family has other notable characteristics. They too have shown themselves to be men of intellectual ability, of culture and of business capacity. The Denison wealth is never emphasized, but from generation to generation they have been unostentatiously living in comfortable circumstances.

It is perhaps unfortunate that the title of colonel, in distinction to the rank of colonel, should have become so much vulgarized as to make its use less of an honor than it should be. There are colonels galore, some of whom bring small credit to the rank. In the Denison family, there have been almost as many bona fide colonels as one could count on the fingers of both hands. To be a colonel seems to have been a family ambition and to earn the rank by meritorious service to have been a family trait. Were all colonels of the Denison stamp there would be a decided increase in the popular estimation of the title.

John Denison himself did not attain the rank. Yet he was none the less a soldier, who had his taste of active service. Before he decided to emigrate to Canada he held a commission as lieutenant in the 2nd West York Militia, a regiment which was on active service for several years. On coming to Canada he did not allow his fondness for soldiering to lapse, for he became a captain in a local regiment of militia and, though he was sixty years of age when the War of 1812 broke out, he went to the front



COLONEL GEORGE TAYLOR DENISON II.,
Founder of the Present Toronto Garrison.

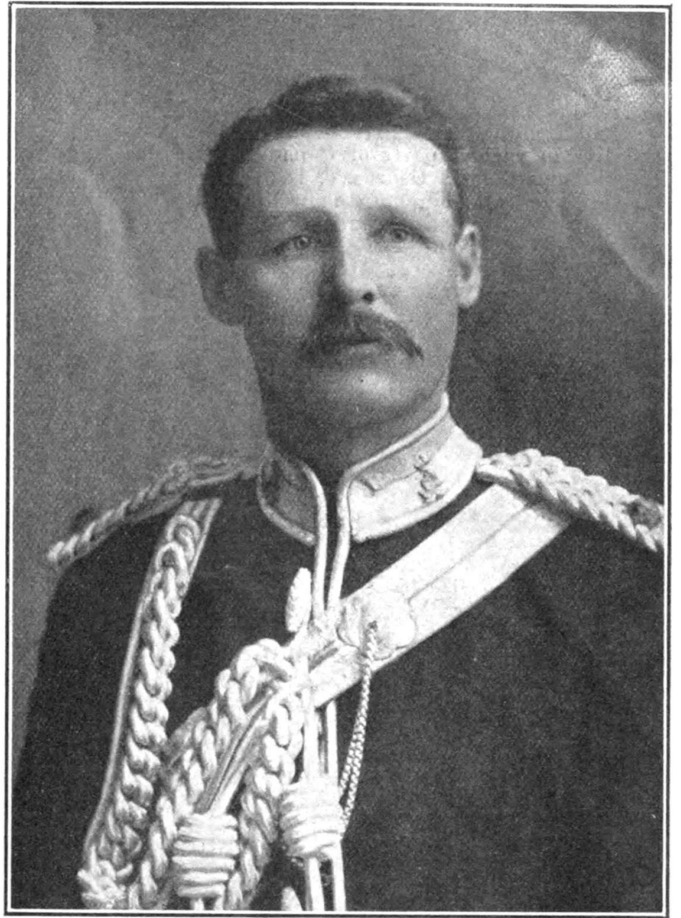
with his sons and fought for his king and country.

Of the four sons of John Denison, only two married, and of the two who married, only George Taylor Denison I., attained distinction as a soldier. In the War of 1812 the latter acted as ensign in the York flank companies and had many exciting experiences. He later, in the year 1822, raised the troop of West York cavalry, which was the nursery for the active militia force of Toronto and the nucleus of the present regiment, the Governor-General's Body Guard. When the rebellion of 1837 broke out, the corps was embodied on full pay in the service of the British Government and was kept on active duty for six months.

A good story is related of an incident that occurred during the excitement of the Rebellion. Major George Denison, on the day that an attack from the rebels was expected in Toronto, was placed in command of the Old Fort on the west side of the city. During the morning a body of armed men were observed coming from the west and moving towards the Fort. As both soldiers and rebels had no uniforms, it was impossible to tell whether they were friends or foes and it was naturally assumed that they were enemies. The ramparts were manned and all prepara-



COLONEL GEORGE TAYLOR DENISON III,
Toronto's Famous Police Magistrate and a Noted Imperialist.



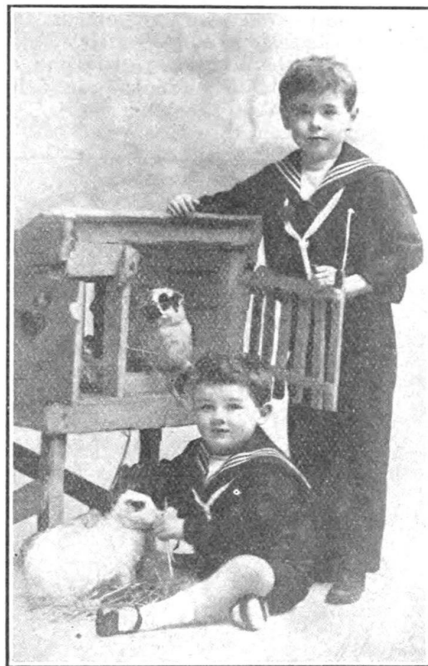
MAJOR GEORGE TAYLOR DENISON IV.,

tions were made to receive an attack. As the party drew nearer, Major Denison suddenly exclaimed, "Bless me, if that man in front doesn't look like my brother Tom." And sure enough it was Tom.

Of course Thomas Denison was not one of the malcontents. He lived some ten miles from Toronto and hearing of the outbreak of hostilities had sent around to his neighbors and raised a good-sized force of farmers who, armed with their own rifles, shot guns, etc., had marched in to aid the cause of their Sovereign. This Thomas Denison was the second married brother. He had served in the War of 1812, as an officer in the militia, and some of his descendants are still living in the vicinity of Toronto.

In the summer of 1838, George Taylor Denison I, was gazetted lieutenant-colonel, the first officer of that rank in the family. He was placed in command of the West York Militia and his troop of cavalry was handed over to his eldest son, Richard L. Denison, who was made captain. At the same time his second son George Taylor Denison II. was gazetted a lieutenant. The connection of the Denisons with what ultimately became the Governor-General's Body Guard was of the most paternal character, so much so that the corps was known familiarly for many years as the Deni-

ed, for when, at the close of the Rebellion the Government took into store the arms and equipment of the troopers,



George Taylor Denison V.. with his

Richard Denison and his brother invested their own money in the purchase of uniforms, swords, belts and pouches, and lent them to the men. In 1855, at the time the Militia Act was passed it was found that this was the only corps organized, uniformed, equipped, armed and drilled in the country, a circumstance directly due to the enthusiastic spirit of its officers.

While Richard Denison transferred his activities to the West York Militia, which he commanded until his death, George Taylor Denison II. raised three more troops of cavalry and formed the Denison Horse into a regiment. Of one of the troops his brother Robert became captain, while his son, George Taylor Denison III., served as cornet. Subsequently he organized other branches of the service and may well be regarded as the founder of the present Toronto garrison. He rose to be commandant of the district and obtained the rank of full colonel.

Robert Denison also evinced an active military spirit. After serving as captain of the first troop of the Body Guard, he resigned in order to raise a company of garrison artillery. During the Fenian Raid he was sent in command of a provisional battalion of thirteen companies of militia to guard the Suspension Bridge over the Niagara River. He rose to be Deputy Adjutant-General in the

Denison K.C., is now a leading barrister in Toronto and a member of the faculty of the Law School at Osgoode Hall.

While both Lieut.-Colonel Richard Denison and Lieut.-Colonel Robert Denison had families and their descendants still live in various parts of Canada, it was through Colonel George T. Denison II. that the full force of the military spirit of the family was transmitted to the third generation. The Colonel was the father of eight sons. Of these, one died in early youth and two passed away later in life after seeing active service. Of the remaining five, three are colonels, one an admiral and the other a civilian—a notable record for one family.

Colonel George T. Denison III. entered the Governor-General's Body Guard in 1855 and rose to be its commanding officer in 1857. He was on active service during the Fenian Raid and commanded the outposts on the Niagara River. He again tasted active service in the North-West Rebellion. In 1907 he was made a full colonel.

His brother, Frederick C. Denison, also rose to the command of the Body Guard and in 1870, during the Red River Rebellion, acted as A. D. C. to Lord Wolseley. It was through this association with the famous British officer that he was selected in 1884 to command the Canadian voyageurs in the Nile Campaign. As a recognition of his services in this connection he was made a C.M.G. and was decorated with the Khedive's Star.

Henry, the third member of the family, did not enter the militia, but Clarence, the fourth son, followed his older brother in the Body Guard. He served in the Fenian Raid as a member of the Upper Canada College corps and saw active service in the North-West Rebellion. In 1898 he attained to the command of the corps with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. Subsequently he commanded the First Cavalry Brigade, Western Ontario Command.

John, the next son, varied the family custom by substituting the navy for the



ADMIRAL JOHN DENISON,
Who has varied the family custom by following a naval career.

army. He entered the Royal Navy as a cadet in 1867 and has risen through all the ranks to that of admiral. He has been employed on many important and responsible missions and recently was in command of the Devonport Division of the Home Fleet. He is now practically retired, residing in England.

Septimus, the seventh son, has made the military life his profession. While the other members of the family have all been militia officers he has gone into the permanent force. After studying as a young man at the Royal Military College, Kingston, he joined the First Staffordshire Regiment as second lieutenant and was promoted in due course to the rank of major. He then transferred his services to the Royal Canadian Regiment and rose to the command in 1910. During the South African War he saw considerable active service, being A.D.C. to Lord Roberts. As a recognition of his services he was created a C.M.G. and was decorated with the Queen's Medal and four clasps. He is now a full colonel and is in command of the Military District of Montreal.

Egerton Denison, the youngest son, did not live long enough to attain the customary family rank. He served through the Nile Campaign as captain on the staff of his brother Fred. The following year he obtained a position on the Gold Coast, but being invalided home, died on the way. So of the eight sons of Colonel George Taylor Denison II., five have been soldiers on land and one has served his sovereign on the sea.

The fourth generation has also been conspicuous in military affairs, though its members are for the most part too youthful to have attained the rank of their fathers. George T. Denison IV. followed the family tradition and entered the Body Guard of which he rose to be major. Another son, Garnet Wolseley Denison, joined the Royal Engineers and has been stationed for some years in India, being now a captain in England. The eldest son of Lieut.-Col. Clarence Denison is a major in the Body Guard, while Admiral Denison's only son is in the British Army.

It must not be assumed, however, that military activities have absorbed all the energies of the Denisons. Taking the lineal descent from old John Denison to George T. Denison III., the four representatives of the family from father to





HEYDON VILLA,

The spacious, park-like estate of Colonel George T. Denison III., in Toronto.

son, while they have undoubtedly bestowed a great deal of attention on military affairs, are yet typical of a very solid and substantial citizenship. They have been landed proprietors, owning land, directing agricultural operations, living in houses surrounded by parks after the manner of English squires and always respecting the dignity of the family name.

John Denison was evidently a fine example of the old-time country gentleman. He lived on Dundas Street where he had 200 acres of land. In spite of his friendship with members of the Government, he never obtained an inch of land without paying for it, a trait which has always been observable among the Denisons. As a family, they have never sought favors but have been quite independent.

George Taylor Denison I. inherited considerable property from his father and also came into possession of some land with his wife, Esther Borden Lippincott, only child of Captain Richard Lippincott, a distinguished United Em-

ed to own 550 acres of land in Toronto, besides over 1,000 acres in its vicinity, having about one hundred tenants on his property. At the time of his death in 1853 his will was probated for £200,000, the largest estate which had been devised up to that time in Upper Canada, representing a value of nearly a million dollars.

George Taylor Denison II. became a lawyer, a profession which has subsequently been followed by several members of the family. His inclination was, however more towards agriculture and soldiering than law and he took more delight in farming his hundred acres of land and in drilling his troopers than in pleading cases in the courts. Of his sons, two followed him in the legal profession, George Taylor Denison III. and Frederick. Clarence took up banking and now occupies an important position in the Standard Bank.

The independent attitude of the Denisons towards government and party influence has been reflected in their dislike of accepting public positions. Though

used their will-power to obtain office. Lieut.-Colonel Fred. Denison was the only member of the family who ever entered Parliament and, if one excepts the services which three generations of George Taylor Denisons rendered as aldermen of the city of Toronto, that is about the extent of their pursuit of public office. It was only by the most earnest solicitation that the present police magistrate of Toronto was induced to take up this work in 1877 and he has undertaken the duties of the court ever since with the utmost independence of spirit. He was indeed the first of his name to hold a public paid office.

By far the most conspicuous member of the family, Colonel Denison is one of Canada's most prominent citizens. A man of strong opinions and deeply-founded convictions, he has naturally been the object of much criticism. No one can advocate a cause of national importance without making himself a mark for the attack of those who do not see eye to eye with him. In advocating a thorough-going imperialism, Colonel

pire Loyalist. He added to his possessions during his lifetime and was reput-

they have been men with a very determined way about them, they have never

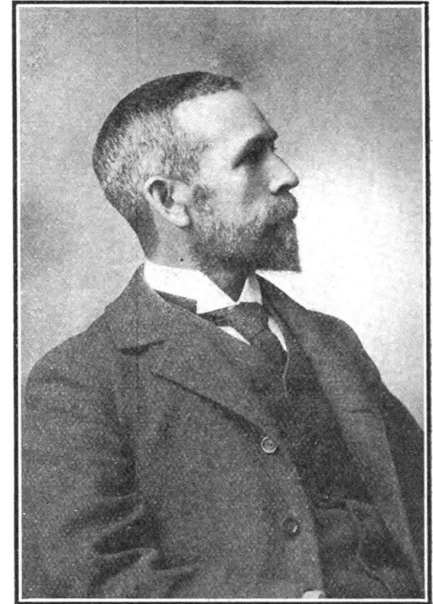
Denison has run counter to the feelings of a good many people, who have not



THE LATE CAPT. EGERTON DENISON
Youngest son of George T. Denison II.

competition, the young Canadian soldier determined to try for the first prize. His earlier work, which had posted him on what had already been written on the subject, gave him confidence, and he went in to win. He worked desperately hard, being handicapped in many directions, but with steady determination he kept at his task, while one by one other competitors dropped out. Success crowned his efforts and the resulting history was awarded the first prize of five thousand roubles.

Since its appearance, the Colonel has twice turned his hand to authorship, once to describe his soldiering experiences and again to tell of his share in the support of the principle of imperial unity. Both books are of an entertaining character, revealing a life-time of activity and an association with most of the prominent people of the last half of the nineteenth century. The Colonel has been no sycophant or worshipper of rank or title, but he has contrived to move on terms of equality and oftentimes of intimacy with many important



HENRY DENISON

hesitated to brand him with the epithets of fire-eater, jingo and the like. But opposition is the spur which has driven the Colonel on. No Denison of them all brooks contradiction and the more he is opposed the more determined he becomes in his advocacy of his side of the argument.

His life may be divided into three compartments, first his soldiering, second his work on behalf of imperial unity and third, his long service as police magistrate of Toronto. To all these he has given that zealous attention which only a born enthusiast bestows on any task in which he is engaged.

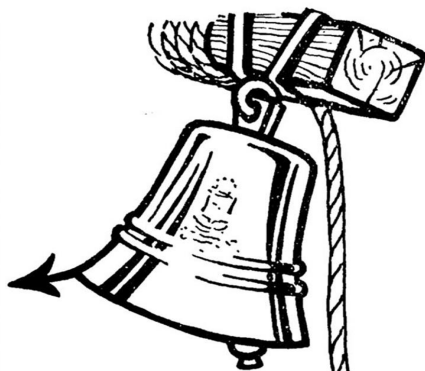
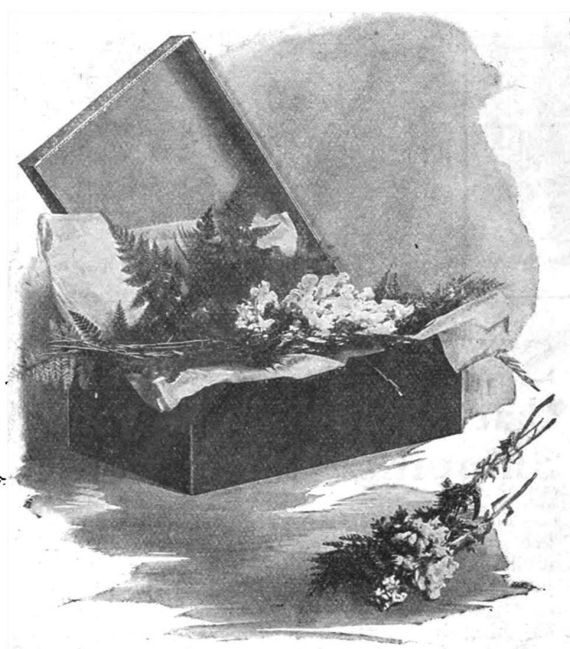
The publication during the summer of 1913 of a new edition of the Colonel's "History of Cavalry" recalls the circumstances under which this noted book was written. In 1874 the Government of Russia offered three prizes for the best history of cavalry from the earliest times. Colonel Denison had already written a book on "Modern Cavalry," advocating certain changes in the organization, armament and method of employing cavalry under modern conditions. This book had been well received, attracting considerable attention in Europe, where it was



personages. In "Soldiering in Canada" and in "The Struggle for Imperial Unity," he has made useful contributions to the history of the Dominion.

It remains for him now to narrate the story of his police court experiences in order to round out the leading incidents of his life. The Colonel's military career, as well as his political efforts, interest after all, only a section of the people. In the police court he comes into touch with all humanity and has a place in the life of everyone. Any book that he may write on this phase of his life will have a wide appeal, and it is not beyond the possibilities that such a book will be written. Colonel Denison is known to-day, not as a soldier nor as an imperialist, but as a magistrate. The others are history; this is reality.

Apropos of his long service in the police court, during which thousands of cases have come before him, it is interesting to know that the Colonel was once arrested himself. It was in 1867 when there was some fear that an attack on the border of the Eastern Townships might be made and he and Sir Henry Havelock-Allan, Deputy Quartermaster-General, went incog to



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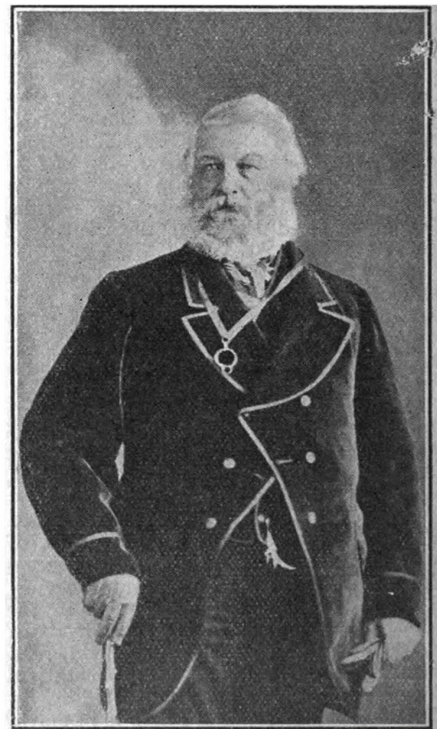
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Fighting Denisons

Continued from page 10.

travelled on foot and their movements presently began to attract attention. At various points they were questioned and at Huntingdon, a captain of militia placed them under arrest as suspicious-looking persons. They were brought before a magistrate but, being able to assure him privately of their identity, were allowed to proceed on their way without further hindrance.

Colonel Denison enjoys a unique reputation for punctuality in his work as police magistrate. In thirty-six years he has never once missed opening his court precisely on the stroke of ten o'clock. For many years it was the clock of St.



LT.-COL. RICHARD DENISON,
Eldest son of George T. Denison II., and
a fine type of the old landed
gentleman.

James Cathedral that marked the hour of his going on the bench, but since 1900, it has been the City Hall clock. It is extraordinary that in all these years some accident has not happened to break the record. That no mishap has occurred must be attributed to the Colonel's habit of always allowing himself a margin of a quarter of an hour and never depending on any other means of conveyance from his home to the court than his own legs.

The family characteristics of the Denisons are sufficiently indicated by what has been written about their

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RUSHOLME,

Residence of the late G. T. Denison II.

ngly proud of their record as a family.

It is perhaps this family pride that has been at the back of their progress to their present position among Canadian families. When others have made the acquisition of wealth or the gaining of social position a motive force to drive them forward, the Denisons have acted from a sense of the necessity of doing nothing to tarnish the family reputation for military prowess and personal honor.



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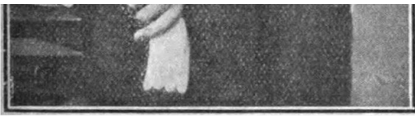
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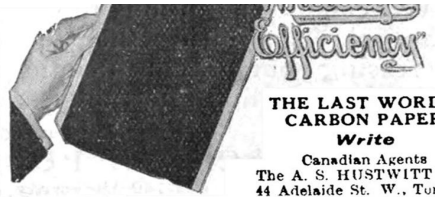


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II., and Deputy Adjutant-General
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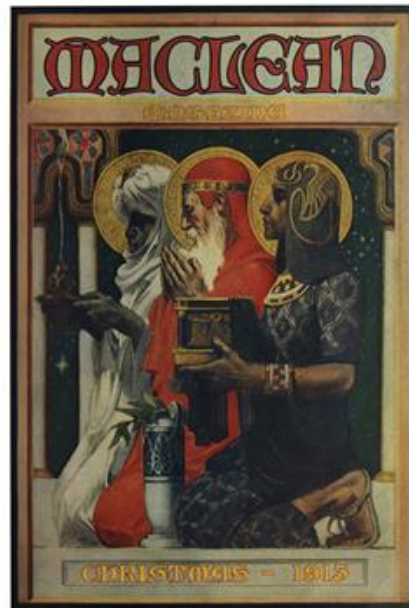
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