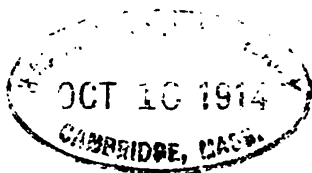


VOL. XVIII



No. 4

THE  
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WITH

NOTES AND QUERIES

*Americanus sum: Americani nihil a me alienum puto*

APRIL, 1914

WILLIAM ABBATT

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## WAR-TIME RECOLLECTIONS

*(Third Paper)*

### THE FIRST NIGHT IN LIBBY

**I** DO not know from experience what the feelings of a condemned man are the night before execution, but I cannot believe them more harrowing than mine the first night I spent in Libby. It was dark and bitterly cold. The wind hissed incessantly through the barred windows to the north, and through the chinks of the rough board floor a steady draught came up and made a balloon of the thin blanket covering Captain Martin and myself.

After 9 o'clock, and when the lights were out and the men lying down in long rows, as if death had come upon them when massed in solid ranks, there still went on a hum of conversation in the "Upper Chickamauga" room. The wonder to me was not that they did not drop off to sleep at once, but that anybody could possibly go to sleep in such a place at any time.

To the east of the room in which I lay there was a similar apartment, which Martin told me was the "Upper East" or "Upper Potomac" Room, below which there was a "Lower East" or "Lower Potomac" Room. The prison officers made no effort to separate or to classify the prisoners, but, as was natural, men from the same commands herded together. The western third of Libby was occupied by men of "Straight's command," who had been captured near Rome, Ga., the previous May, and were therefore the "oldest fish" in prison, and by prisoners from our army in West Virginia, principally Milroy's men. The middle rooms, which were also the darkest, were filled with men from the Armies of the Ohio, Mississippi and Cumberland, a majority of whom had been "gobbled" at Chickamauga. The two east rooms were the brightest and warmest, and their occupants were the jolliest and noisiest. Most of them had been "scooped in" the first day at Gettysburg, or from Sickles's Corps on the second, and all of them, with the exception of General Neal Dow and a few others taken at Port Hudson, belonged to the Army of the Potomac.

For fully an hour after the lights were out the wildest kind of an uproar continued in the Upper Potomac Room. There were cheering,

stamping, cat calls, and barking, and over all the confusion I could catch these queries, the meaning of which I subsequently learned:

"Who the devil stole my blanket?"

"Teed (Major John, 116th Pa.) of Reading!" came a thundering shout.

"Who hid behind the big gun?" from one.

"Boltz of Berks!" from what seemed a thousand.

"Where do you wish you was?"

"Home with my mother!"

Here followed in every key, from shrill falsetto to gruff bass: "Oh, I want to go home!" "I don't like this place!" "I want breakfast early—and lots of it!" "Cook for ten and let me eat alone!" "Bow wow, wow—gr-r-r bow!" "Choke that d—d dog!"

A few seconds of silence and then a weary voice calls out: "Boys, do keep still and let a fellow sleep!"

A roar of wild laughter that threatened to lift the roof, which to me had no merriment in its sound, greeted this request. Then the comments began:

"Oh, yes, let him repose!"

"Get him some soothing syrup!"

"Rock him to sleep, mother; rock him to sleep"; this was the refrain of a then popular song, and the whole Upper Potomac Room seemed to be singing it. This was followed by the requests:

"Fan his head, some one."

"Give him an artillery punch and let me smell the glass. Ah-h-h!"

"Ah-h-h!" from everybody.

"Boys, upon my soul I'm ashamed of you," said the man who wanted to sleep.

"And we're ashamed of ourselves—even though we are in the jug. Now, attention; I have a motion to make, this in a commanding voice.

"What is it, Ryan?" from a score.

"I move, as the night is cold, and we can't sleep anyhow, that we spend the time profitably."

"Second the motion. How's it to be done?"

"I move that Colonels Cesnola, (Luigi P. di Cesnola, Lieut. Col. 11th, and Col. 4th N. Y. Cavalry), Cavada, (Frederick F. Cavada, Lieut. Col. 114th Pa.), von Helmerich, (Gustav Helmrich, Lieut. Col. 4th and 5th Missouri Cavalry), and myself to appointed a committee of four to go down to the Lower Room and invite General Neal Dow to come up and give us a temperance lecture. 'I've made up my mind to swear off for some time. All in favor will say 'Aye.'"

"Aye!" in thundering tones.

"All opposed, 'No.'"

"No!" in tones still more thundering.

"The Chair is undecided!"

"Division! division! division!"

"I call for a rising vote!"

The gentleman who made the last suggestion was unanimously invited to go out to the spigot and soak his head.

"Captain Maas! Ed Maas of the Eighty-eighth Penn-syl-va-ni-ay!"

"Well! What the devil is it now?" This from a man who had evidently been trying to sleep.

"Give us a song with a thundering long chorus to it; something that'll warm a fellow like a fire, a jug of punch, and a feather bed."

"And will you hold your d—d tongues after that and go to sleep?"

"Oh, come, Captain, we'll hold our tongues, for we ain't women; but don't ask the impossible," said the man who wanted to hear Neal Dow.

A pause, then a whole regiment seemed to be clearing its throat preparatory to helping along the chorus. Then, high above the whistling of the wind through the bars and the beating of the sleet upon the roof, a ringing tenor voice sang the words:

"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,  
He is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.  
He has loosed the fateful lightnings of his terrible swift sword,  
God's truth is marching on."

As Mrs. Howe's splendid Battle Hymn is not before me, I am not quite sure of the words, but I can never forget the thrilling chorus that followed it. Again and again was repeated the "Glory, glory, hallelujah. God's truth is marching on."

But even the exultant spirits of the Upper Potomac men had a limit. Silence followed the last chorus, and the guards took up the cry:

"Half-past ten! Post No. 1, and all's well!"

Before 11 o'clock the prisoners were at rest, or seemed to be; but throughout the night there was no quiet. Nearly every man in the Upper Chickamauga seemed to have a cough, and those not troubled in that way appeared to be afflicted with snoring or a tendency to talk in their sleep. Only a Dante could properly portray my feelings that first night in Libby. I am very sure I never spent a longer one before or since.

It was yet so dark that one could not distinguish a familiar face twenty feet away, when Sergeant Turner and Little Ross came to the head of the steps and shouted: "Turn out for roll call! Turn out!"

Preparing for roll call was a very simple matter. As the only clothing removed before retiring were the boots or shoes, there was no trouble dressing. The blankets were rolled up and placed against the dividing brick walls or thrown over the heavy beams, which served as racks for anything owned by the unfortunates who had their quarters in the middle of the room. There were about 1,300 prisoners in the building at this time, and the roll call consisted of the very primitive plan of standing them in ranks four deep, counting the first line and multiplying it by four. As escapes were not unusual, it was easy to conceal the absence of a man who had "lit out," particularly in that dark Lower Chickamauga Room, which, because of its central location, was the place in which we were counted. If a man were missing, a prisoner in the rear rank on the right of the line would wait until he was seen by

one of the Sergeants keeping the tally, then he would drop down behind, scuttle along to the vacant place, and then "bob up" as serenely innocent as a "fresh fish" from the home guard.

Very often in a spirit of mischief and in order to perplex little Ross and "Black George"—the former was liked and the latter detested—this trick would be played when there was no need to account for a missing man, so that there would be frequently an extra half dozen Yankees present who could not be found on the prison books. About the middle of December it dawned upon Major Turner's mind that this plan of roll call was defective, and thereafter we were huddled and jammed every morning into the Upper Potomac Room, and through an opening in the dividing wall, which was kept closed at other times, we were counted, one at a time, into the Upper Chickamauga: but, as will be seen hereafter, even this precaution was not adequate.

After roll call a grand rush was made for the cook room. This was the middle room on the ground floor facing Cary Street. In it there were four old-fashioned kitchen stoves and a few long, rough tables; rather limited accommodations for the number of men in prison, but, as an offset, it should be added that the stoves were quite sufficient for the cooking there was to do. Up to the 1st of January, 1864, the friends of prisoners in the North or "God's country," as the men called it, were permitted to send through supplies under flag of truce. These boxes contained clothing and condensed food, which, after being carefully examined, were delivered to those to whom they were addressed. This gave the men who had been in prison for sometime and whose friends knew of their whereabouts a decided advantage over the impoverished "fresh fish" But I recall with pride that no man was permitted to go hungry in that prison while another had food. Yes, there was one exception, to which I may refer again.

The prisoners who suffered most and were most dependent on their more affluent comrades were those from Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia, in which States the friends were fugitives, impoverished themselves, or within the enemy's lines.

I was Captain Martin's guest, as were two other "fresh fish," and these increased his mess to seven. He did the cooking, that is, made coffee, "cornfederate coffee," out of roasted, or rather burned, corn-bread; vile stuff it was, but then it had the merit of being hot; the heel of

a molasses jug helped to allay its bitterness. After a time I grew to like it. This coffee, with a few dabs of their stringy beef, heated on a stove lid, and the hardest cornbread that a man's teeth ever bit into, constituted the breakfast of one mess. But hunger makes the most repulsive food palatable.

Some men were cooking ham at one of the stoves that morning, and I recall hanging round just to sniff in the intoxicating and exhilarating odor. Of course, I broke the Tenth Commandment into smithereens while I was looking on, but soldiers, and particularly prisoners of war, soon get on good terms with their conscience.

After breakfast—why it was not done before I never could guess—rations were served, the head of every mess drawing for his number. These rations consisted of about a half pint of black beans, a half loaf of corn bread, and a few ounces of flabby, lean beef for each man, with an allowance of salt once a week. Each bean was the abode of a bug in the chrysalis state, so that it had to be crushed and washed to get rid of its animal life before it was cooked. But when the meat supply was stopped in January, men ceased to be so fastidious and cooked and ate their beans with an eye to the nutritive quality of their insect inhabitants. The corn bread was called "iron-clad" and it would have been twice as wholesome and palatable if half the cob had been left out of the meal.

These matters seem trivial now, but I dwell on them because they were so important to me and impressed me so vividly at the time. It should be said in excuse for these wretched rations that they were, perhaps, on the whole, quite as good, if not so ample, as those which were issued to a majority of the Southern soldiers. Yet, on the other hand, there would have been no suffering nor need of Confederate rations if the Southern authorities had permitted our Government to send, as it offered to do, all the supplies through that were necessary for the comfort of the prisoners, or if the boxes sent through by friends had been distributed, instead of being confiscated as they were. When such intercourse ceased the hunger began in dead earnest.

The room directly under the Lower Potomac was the hospital. The building was all under one roof, but three stories high on the north or Cary Street side and four on the south side owing to the slope on which it was built. It was, or could be, turned into three warehouses,



each with its separate cellar and front door. At the southern end of each room in which the prisoners were confined there was a water spigot and a sink, the latter in a narrow frame addition, like a long packing box, that had been added on after the place was turned into a prison. These sinks were endurable so long as the wind did not blow from the South, but when it did—and these occasions grew more frequent with the approach of Spring—the stench added another to the tortures of the place. It was no doubt with an eye to cleanliness that a gang of negroes came in every morning with brooms and buckets of water and proceeded to scrub, or rather, to wet every floor. This accounted for the coughing. Frequently the water froze as fast as they applied it, and on rainy days the floors remained wet till the men lay down on them at night.

By way of introducing me to my fellow-boarders and making me acquainted with the building, Captain Forsyth of the One Hundredth Ohio—(probably James W., afterwards Colonel 64th O.), took me in charge. “You will find not a few notables here,” he said, as he led me into the Lower Potomac, adding, “there goes one of them now.”

Following the direction of Forsyth’s hand, I saw a slender man of medium height, who walked back and forth, back and forth, incessantly, with his chin on his breast as if he were mentally struggling with a most difficult problem. His hair and beard were nearly white; he wore a tattered overcoat, and on his head was a red flannel cap, evidently extemporized from one leg of a pair of drawers. His bearing was not military, but there was a set to the lips and a glint in the gray eyes that bespoke him a man of brains and force.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“That,” replied Forsyth, “is the celebrated Neal Dow (Colonel 13th Maine.) He takes his punishment like a man, never whimpers, and so the boys like him.”

After I had taken in General Dow I saw a stout, foreign-looking soldier, with black eyes, black hair, and black beard, passing, but what particularly arrested my attention was the fact that this officer wore the best and warmest coat I had seen in prison. It was a cavalry tunic, trimmed with fur. In reply to my question, Forsyth said:

“Oh, that’s Colonel Cesnola of the Fourth New York Cavalry. They say he is an Italian Count, but, be that as it may, he is a gentleman;

those who've served with him say he is as brave as they make 'em. Another thing that makes him popular is that he doesn't whine about exchange nor talk against the Government, but bears his punishment like a philosopher. Ah, there is another celebrity, that genteel, natty-looking man with the short, gray beard. Who is he? Well, that is Colonel Sanderson, Quartermaster of the Tenth Corps. He formerly managed a popular hotel for Southerners in New York City\*; that may be the reason he has more privileges than other prisoners. He is not popular, but I have found him to be a gentleman, and I know of my own knowledge that he has influenced the Confederate authorities to do better for our poor fellows over on Belle Isle."

After this I was introduced to Sawyer (Henry W., Major 1st N. J. Cav.), and Flynn, two of the best-known Captains in prison. Flynn was a modest, dark-featured man of five and thirty from Indiana; Sawyer was a well-formed, light-haired Captain of Cavalry from New Jersey. Some months before this Burnside hanged as spies two Confederate Captains, whom he caught within his lines in Kentucky. In retaliation for this the Confederate authorities sent down to Libby Prison and ordered two Yankee Captains to be selected by lot and hanged. There were one hundred-thirteen blanks, with two prizes, placed in a hat, and each Captain was invited to select one. It was one of those rare lottery cases in which each blank was worth more than a fortune—it meant life. Sawyer and Flynn got the unlucky prizes, and were at once taken from prison. Sawyer was plucky, but very nervous. Flynn bade good-bye to his friends and walked off as coolly as if hanging were the most unimportant thing in the world.

It is surprising how quickly in those days of blockades, videttes, and guards news flew from Richmond to Washington and from Washington to Richmond. Three days after this drawing a flag of truce bore a message to the Confederate lines. It said that Brigadier General Fitzhugh Lee of the Confederate Army, then a prisoner in our hands, and another officer of equal rank, had been ordered to the Old Capitol Prison in Washington, and that they would be hanged as soon as it was learned that Sawyer and Flynn had been disposed of in the same way.

\*This was the New York Hotel, on Broadway from Washington to Waverly Places. Hiram Cranston was its head.

So there was no hanging, and the two Captains returned to Libby. Those prizes turned out for the best in the end, for some weeks after I reached Libby Sawyer and Flynn were exchanged for the officers who had been selected as hostages for their lives.

I have often been asked how the men managed to spend their time in prison, and before learning the facts from experience I had had the same curiosity myself, but it needed only that first morning to satisfy me. Near the windows, where the light was best, but not so near as to tempt the fire of the vigilant guards, who had orders to shoot down any prisoner who touched the bars, there were scores of men carving such pieces of bone as had come through with the meat. From the quantity of bone-carving I saw that day and subsequently, and from my own share of the meat ration, I came to the conclusion that the beef was principally bone. Men devoted to this kind of work were said to have "bone on the brain." Crosses, napkin rings, forks, spoons, and crucifixes were in every stage of manufacture. Much of the work was very crude, but it had the advantage of keeping the mind and the hands busy, and that was everything in that place; and then some of it denoted fine taste and even artistic skill. This was particularly the case with the work done by Lieutenant Colonel Henry of the Fifteenth Kentucky Cavalry, but then he had achieved reputation as a sculptor before he entered the army.

Some men were knitting stockings with wooden needles. A few were reading books that had been sent through from the North.

A. N. HAYS.

*(To be continued)*

NOTE—After corresponding with many old soldiers, we have concluded, acting on the suggestions of Captain W. B. Gray, late 5th N. Y. Cavalry now residing at Windsor, Conn., that the officer most likely to have been the author of these papers is the late Captain Asa N. Hays, 7th Tenn. Cavalry.