

DIARY IN LIBBY PRISON.

Every Saturday,
April 4, 1863.]

varied from four to twenty and thirty, the number of messes in the army of the Potomac prison company being twenty-four. The regular rations were now half a loaf of bread, a little more than two ounces of rice, between three and four ounces of meat, for each officer per diem. Such luxuries as coffee, tea, and sugar, the officers had to provide with their own money. This, of course, they could only do when they had it, and when the money they might receive from the North was delivered to them by the prison authorities, a thing which I soon discovered did not always happen.

To understand better the operation of the culinary department, I must describe the prison in its *ensemble*. It is an isolated three-story building, facing the James River, or rather the canal skirting its left bank. It was windowed all over, and comprised nine compartments. The third and second stories were entirely occupied by the inmates; while a part of the ground floor served as the kitchen for some of the prisoners. The rest of the building comprised the hospital and the office of the prison authorities.

It was very singular to a "fresh fish" to see for the first time the stir and bustle around the different iron stoves, which to avoid mistakes were marked in large letters on the wall, with such ambitious inscriptions as "Army of the Potomac," "Army of the Cumberland." A more fanciful collection of cooking utensils has never been seen than that which crowded the surface of the prison stores, which were surrounded by scores of anxious and vigilant attendants. The different dishes prepared were no less peculiar. Here were some remnants of blackened ham and smoked tongue, mixed up with crumbs and crackers of different species, struggling to stew themselves into some uniform whole; there dry crusts of bread, worked up with all the ingenuity of necessity, into fanciful puddings and "flapjacks."

I used in London often to admire, at "Dr. Butler's Head," a tavern in the busiest part of the city, the earnestness and collected quietude of the merchants standing drawn up, one rank deep, along the bar running from one side of the room to the other, and despatching the steaks served up to them. But that scene was quite eclipsed in my eyes, the first time I saw the "Milroy officers" on a similar occasion. They seemed to be fearfully in earnest; and for the sake of truth, I feel bound to state, that they were invariably the first at their breakfasts. I have more than once found them despatching the first meal while it was yet dark, and I cannot help thinking that they must have been fully impressed with the saying of Frederick the Great, that "The first rule in tactics is, a good breakfast."

Most of the prisoners contrived to make chairs for themselves from the boxes or barrels sent them with certain articles from the North. I appealed one day to one of the negro boys (who came up daily to sweep the prison) to make me some kind of stool. To this Jerry readily consented; and in less

than three days he performed his promise. I was as proud of this rough little stool as many a king on his throne, and there were not wanting neighbors to whom I was an object of envy.

I had no difficulty in perceiving that many looked on me with a feeling of particular compassion, though I was at first unable to understand its real meaning, considering the fact that every soldier must be prepared for the chances of war. But I soon found out the cause of this pity, the cessation, to wit, of what is called "the operations of the cartel," or, in other words, the stopping of all exchange. "You are in for good," they would tell me. The cartel, of which I confess I never had heard or read of before, was concluded in July, 1862, between Major-General Dix and General Hill, its principal point providing for the exchange of prisoners, with the excess on either side to be paroled. This, I now learned for the first time, was at present out of operation. Some thought that the reason of it was the difficulty about the exchange of negro soldiers, who were organized subsequent to the date of the cartel.

The strangeness of the scene in Libby, the presence of prisoners from such a variety of battle-fields and skirmishes, extending from Chesapeake Bay to the waters of Mexico, some of them presenting most curious figures, and the various novel experiences of the place, served to keep me for weeks in a state of continual surprise and bewilderment, and even to make me forget the nature of the diet on which I lived. What I most felt, was the want of fresh air, the fumes of the prison being rather too strong for a "fresh fish." Very frequently I was startled from my mudy meditations by the daily appearance in the morning of an old, shrewd negro, whose vocation was to purify the prison with *tar smoke*. He had been formerly a "valet" of General Banks, and was taken prisoner in the retreat from Strasburg. He would announce his presence in the morning with the lusty proclamation, "Here is a good smoke without money or price," the sound of which would be re-echoed by the multitude in most fanciful strains. All of a sudden you would hear the cry of "Pack up, — all exchanged," ring through the dismal prison; and, after a short interval, you would find yourself entertained by a sentimental duet or quartette of "Home, sweet home!" "No one to love," "When this cruel war is over," &c., &c.

One morning as I tried to wind my way to the kitchen below, in quest of less suffocating air, an officer, whom I had never seen before, peremptorily stopped me, when the following conversation passed between us: "I suppose you have seen service in the old country?" "You are right." "You have not so much heavy fighting in your country as we have here?" "Not so much without sufficient reasons and sufficient results." "I'll be d—d if Napoleon's troops have seen such hard fighting as my division." "I dare say not." My unknown friend afterwards began to talk of the "interior side of an arc, interior and exterior lines," and similar borrowed stuff. At this point, however, which reminded me of similar conversations I had heard when in camp, I could n't help bursting out a-laughing. It was the first laugh I enjoyed in Libby after a month's imprisonment.

I could not help having my attention particularly attracted by a few prison-figures, whose pensive mood, or striking aspect, or distinguished career, made them objects of special interest. There were



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also figures of a different description, few in number, I am glad to say, but for all that original enough. These looked as happy as man can be. They took the practical view of their situation, thinking that three or four dollars a day for sitting in Libby was rather a good, profitable "job." A hideous sight.

Whenever I had a chance, I tried to stick my head out of the window to take in a mouthful of fresh air. I could see distinctly the old peaceful sign-board, hanging on the western corner of the building, "Libby and Son, Ship Changers and Grocers,"—hanging there as quiet and business-like as ever. Whether that respectable firm ever expected to have their stores visited by such large numbers as we mustered, is very doubtful. The lifelessness in the street along the canal really amazed me. Only now and then you would see a buggy, with one or two persons inside, wheeling lazily by, and hardly more loiterers on foot. Specimens of the fair sex, always rare sights for soldiers, were still less visible. And if you saw a half-muffled negro woman pass by, you could claim to have enjoyed a sight! It was the law of Libby (a law, the origin of which is enveloped in mystery) that whenever a female was seen looming in the distance, her presence was announced by the loud call of "Gun-boat"; and on such occasions there were desperate charges to the windows, which would have extorted admiration from the most unwarlike spectator.

What appeared an unnatural sight to me in the streets was, to see so many soldiers in blue coats. The putting on an enemy's uniform is what has never been known in any European army. It would be reckoned the lowest degree of degradation for the soldier. I cannot reconcile the conduct of the Southern cavaliers in this respect with their avowed contempt of the Yankees.

There was a great lack of general news in the papers, which we received by the regular channel every morning; and the standing despatch from Charleston, "123 shells were thrown into the city," &c., reminded us forcibly of the dead prolonged calm reigning on James River. Among the sights of the prison the distribution of letters was one of the most interesting. The announcement, "Letters," set Libby rocking all over. The rush into the room where the distribution took place was most formidable, and woe to him who stood in the way of these bounding and cheering columns.

The *ennui* of prison life is a great spur to inventive genius, and it was not wanting here. There was no end of amusements. As in high life, the true gayeties of Libby commenced at night, after the usual call of the guards, "Lights out!" which happened always at 9 o'clock. An hour before this call, and many hours after it you would hear a thousand variations of "Lights out!" in which all the voices of animated nature seemed to be blended, now and then interrupted by the shrill cry of a frightened negro woman. When this noise had subsided, the time for action arrived; and one heard in the dark the hurling of missiles, in the shape of dried-up crusts of bread and old boots, which never failed to do some execution. Against such hilarities, mixed with traits of vulgar rowdyism, there was no possible remedy. A stranger passing by Libby at midnight, might have imagined himself to be near a lunatic asylum or a menagerie. The place, in fact, was not, on the whole, distinguished for refined manners; and there was no end of nuisances surrounding one, irrespective of what had to be borne from the hands of the

authorities. One of these was the utter recklessness with which the spot on the floor where one had to spread his blanket for the night was made to serve the place of a spittoon.

The want of means to procure certain necessities, made one the more feel the insufficiency of the food supplied by the Confederacy. There were officers here wearing the same shirts which they had on when taken prisoners several months before. There were others who had, indeed, two shirts, but not the means to pay for the washing of them. Only the old "tar-smoking" negro had the privilege to take out the washing, and one had generally a fortnight to wait before the things came back.

Libby, I find, has also its academic side. Lieutenant-Colonel Corada teaches Spanish, Captain Charlier French, Captain Place phonography, while Lieutenant Stearns has an English grammar class, explaining the meaning of nouns, active and neuter verbs, &c. This last class appears to me rather too suggestive. General Neal Dow lectures on temperance, which, alas! reminds us only of our destitution; while Major Henry discourses eloquently of spiritualism.

From a few intelligent officers, I gathered interesting information about the operations around Vicksburg; and I had at the same time the satisfaction to hear from the "Bobadil" style of officers of numerous desperate battles, the names of which I do not remember to have ever heard mentioned elsewhere. One of these desperate battles attracted my attention to such a degree, that I keep it all quite fresh in my memory: "I was sent, sir, by Colonel _____, with seventy-five men, to attack three hundred and twenty-five rebels stationed at _____, and strongly intrenched. As our boys advanced close to the breastworks, the rebels rushed out, do you see, with a tremendous yell. Hereupon, sir, I ordered the boys to gradually fall back, do you see, and in so doing I formed a semicircular line, intending to surround the 'rebs,' do you see? Well, sir, in we closed upon them, answering their dreadful volleys with a well directed and murderous fire. The 'rebs,' thus pressed, sir, and surrounded, began to waver, and fell back into the breastworks; our boys, charging all the time, followed the 'rebs' closely into the works, having nearly carried the first line of the intrenchments, when two rebel cavalry regiments were seen to approach on our left flank." A very singular battle, truly, and worthy of the hero of Gadshill. My informant could not tell me the loss of the enemy, who was "engaged all night, sir, in carrying off their dead and wounded." I unfortunately forgot to ask him what the two rebel cavalry regiments did after their appearance, and whether "our boys" moved on "interior" or "exterior" lines. Added to those I knew of before entering Libby, I can say that I have now in memory 127 desperate battles, all fought within the last two years!

On entering the prison, I joined the mess of my Hungarian friend, and this I did the more readily, as he undertook to provide me with something like a cup and knife and fork, articles which I at once experienced were not easily to be got in Libby. Our daily meals consisted of rye coffee and bread in the morning, and rice soup with a few ounces of meat in the evening. Occasionally the major was enabled to borrow a few dollars to purchase butter and sugar, which were of course a great addition to our spare diet. After a few weeks I began indeed to feel, both from the spare diet and the pestilential

atmosphere, as if my knees were giving way under me; yet the novelty of the scene made me in part forget my increasing debility.

Curious to say, even in the society of Libby, where everything appertaining to decency of intercourse was blasted, and in many instances wilfully disregarded, — even in this place, where misery brought all to a level, there was a certain etiquette, which at first annoyed and rendered timid a "fresh fish." And so it happened that I proceeded in my reconnoissances but slowly, and with a certain hesitation. It was more than a week after my entering that I ventured into the room below me, which represented the *bon ton*. In this room were harbored General Neal Dow, an elderly gentleman, who bore his imprisonment with considerable equanimity, and several colonels distinguished more or less from the great mass of the prisoners.

