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TEN MONTHS IN LIBBY PRISON.

BY LOUIS PALMA DI CESNOLA,

LATE COLONEL 4TH N. Y. CAVALRY.

Colonel Cesnola is a Sardinian of noble family, and was educated in the best military schools of Europe, having been placed in that at Paris when only nine years of age. His father was at that time Secretary of War under the Sardinian government. The son came to this country just before the breaking out of the rebellion, and hostilities quickly elicited his enthusiastic interest in the cause of the Union. Having had experience in the Crimean war, as a member of the staff of the Sardinian General-in-chief, he was well qualified for the duties of the field. In September, 1862, he took command of the 4th N. Y. cavalry, whose superior discipline and many brave achievements have gained for it an enviable fame. At the battle of Aldie, June, 1863, he was commended for his gallant conduct by General Kilpatrick, early in the action, but afterwards, while far in the advance, he was surrounded by superior numbers, and taken prisoner. He spent ten months in Libby prison. After his exchange he returned to his regiment, and led the brigade to which it belonged in many severe engagements previous to its mustering out, in September last.

Soon after entering Libby, the rebel officer in charge, offered Colonel Cesnola, with some other *foreigners*, better quarters than their fellow officers had, which proposal was indignantly rejected. "We are U. S. officers," they said.

I entered the service of the United States in October, 1861, and was captured in Virginia the 17th of June, 1863, at the cavalry

engagement of Aldie. I was marched, mostly on foot, more than one hundred miles to Staunton, and thence by railroad conveyed to the rebel capital and confined in the Libby prison. I arrived in Richmond the 25th of June, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, and remained immured in that tobacco factory until the 24th of March, 1864, when I was specially exchanged for Colonel Brown of the 59th Georgia, (—) regiment.

SEARCHING FOR VALUABLES.

At my arrival in Libby I was called into the office of the commanding officer of that military prison, Captain (now Major) Thos. P. Turner, and by him, my name, rank, regiment, etc., was registered in his book; the walls of Turner's office were covered with captured U. S. colors, regimental battle-flags, and cavalry guidons. From that office I was ordered into a spacious dark hall, in a corner of which, a rebel sergeant searched me through from head to foot, in the roughest manner possible. He took away from me every little trinket I had, my penknife, eyeglasses; meerschaum-pipe, matches, and a bunch of small keys; and was angry because he could not find any greenbacks on my person. He ordered me to take off my boots for inspection; I answered him that I always had a servant to perform that service for me. He insisted, but I refused until he took them off himself, and searched them very minutely. He asked me what I had done with my money, and if I had any watch. I told him that a chivalrie Southron had stolen my watch and money during the march from Middleburg to Staunton. He began to abuse me, using very profane language and denying my veracity. I told him that perhaps the gentleman intended only to borrow those articles from me. Captain Fisher, a signal officer of the Army of the Potomac, was punished and kept walk-

that is three hundred men. The greatest part of the day was lost in going from Richmond to Belle Isle, and returning. Sometimes the boatman was not there to convey us to the other side of the James river, and much precious time was thus lost. I endeavored to obtain permission to sleep at Belle Isle, in order to be at work early in the morning in distributing, as the cold weather was terribly felt by our poor men. But Major Turner had no power to grant this, and having asked General Winder if an application to him in writing, signed by the Committee of Distribution, would be taken into consideration, his brutish answer was, "*No, certainly not.*"

Besides the time lost in going and coming back and waiting for the boat, we lost much time there also, as the squads when called out by us, were sometimes receiving their rations; at another they were at roll-call, etc. So we could not transact business really more than three hours every day, which retarded the distribution considerably, while we would have very willingly distributed day and night in order to shelter with good warm clothes the thousands of half naked bodies, shivering from head to foot from cold and hunger. I am a soldier by profession since my boyhood; I have been in several wars in Europe; I am familiar with death, and have seen it in all its different aspects, but my heart has never been moved as it was by the condition of those men at Belle Isle. Their frozen feet wrapped in a piece of blanket or an old flannel shirt, in place of the boots which were taken away from them by their captors, those long, pale, hungry faces, with hair and beard uncut for months; a kind of perpetual motion given to their bodies by the millions of vermin that devoured their very flesh; their emaciated forms, telling at first sight how many long and weary, weary months they had been there fighting against death in the form of scurvy, low fevers, diarrhoea, congestion of the lungs, etc.; their feeble voices saying, "Oh! Colonel, do give us something to eat, for God's sake," etc. These scenes, I confess, were to me heartrending in the extreme. These men received at meal time, one bucket of broken pieces of corn bread, and one bucket of over-boiled sweet potatoes for every one hundred men! I saw it myself many

times! Indeed, it was so revolting that I think even pigs would have sickened at it. How the chiefs of squads could divide so small a quantity of food in one hundred parts has always been for me a problem, which I am still unable to solve; though often, while distributing the clothing, some men would come to me and complain that for whole days they could not get anything to eat, because before their turn came the bucket was empty!

It was no wonder if these poor, starved human beings would eat rats and dogs. I recollect the fact of a rebel officer having gone inside the inclosure to visit the prisoners, accompanied by a dog. He did not miss it until he was coming out; but, alas! it was too late, and by that time he could only see one man gnawing with voracity his dog's last bone! The next day the Richmond Enquirer, edited by that Irish patriot, John Mitchell, had a leading article entitled, "Dogs eat dogs," and gave the particulars of the affair, summing up by saying that the Yankee prisoners at Belle Isle, though furnished with plenty of wholesome food, preferred to eat dogs.

Of these six thousand four hundred and thirty-four prisoners, over seven hundred were at the time I first visited Belle Isle, without tents or any shelter whatever at night, lying in ditches, or digging holes in the sandy ground in which they slept in a bundle, one over the other, and I heard that often in the morning those who were on the top were found frozen to death, and I actually saw men wrapped up in blankets brought out of the enclosure who were found dead and frozen in ditches outside of the tents!

Upon this subject I had frequent conversations with Lieutenant Bossieux, who told me himself he had several times made proper requisitions for the necessary tents; that he went to see the quartermaster of the prison himself (an Ohio renegade, was a greater scoundrel than any of the Southern race); that they were promised but never delivered. He also told me he had made a plan for barracks which would have cost very little and would have accommodated our men all comfortably, but that he never heard anything more about it, nor of boards given for that or any other purpose. After having distributed the contents of several

boxes, I perceived that the empty boxes were, by order of Lieutenant Bossieux piled up as if to be used for some purpose. I went to see him, and told him I intended to give to the men those empty boxes, so that they could floor their tents with them. He said he had instructions from the quartermaster to save all those boxes, that he wanted them to pack army clothing in, but he would give me in return the boards necessary to floor all the tents. I said nothing further for three or four days, but seeing that the boards were coming only in the same manner as the tents so many times asked, I took upon myself, at the cost of being superseded for it, not to wait any longer, and I distributed them to the men, gladdening many hearts. A portion of these boxes were used to make coffins for those who had ceased to suffer in this wicked place.

PLUNDERING.

There has been so much said about the rebel government stealing half the boxes sent to us by the government, and the United States Sanitary Commission, that I have recalled to my memory all the minutest particulars which have reference to them, and I have come to the conclusion that the largest number of the boxes of clothing were turned over to us for distribution, and that they had no official connection with the heavy robberies which we have unfortunately sustained, and were unable to prevent.

RICHMOND CITY BATTALIONS.

It is true that the Richmond City battalions, who guarded the federal prisoners, had a large number of their men clothed in U. S. uniforms, but my opinion (I may be wrong) is, that the warehouse adjacent to the Libby, in which all our boxes were stored and guarded by them, was visited at night by these undisciplined and unprincipled soldiery, who would appropriate to themselves and sell to others, all the clothing they wanted. I came to this conclusion, after I had visited that warehouse several times, as I found ragged rebel uniforms left here and there in the corners of the warehouse; showing plainly that some of the rebels had made their hasty toilet there. When one hundred and nine union officers escaped from the Libby, through the tunnel,

I had the scurvy and could not join the party. The next morning I conversed with some of the sentinels, and laughed at their great vigilance during the previous night. They said that they had seen men coming out from the yard of the warehouse, and running as fast as they could, but they supposed *it was some of their own guard making a raid on our boxes.* Several times in the stillness of the night, I heard plainly in the warehouse the hammering and breaking of boxes, but this was the robbers' midnight work, and scarcely chargeable to the rebel authorities. The rebel government was, however, guilty of the grossest indifference as to the safe keeping of our boxes; of that there is no doubt, but I cannot bring myself to believe that their authorities were officially connected with it.

The boxes sent from Richmond to Belle Isle for immediate distribution, were also plundered during the night, even after I obtained permission to put some of our own men to guard them. Our hungry men, tempted by the sentinels with bread and pies, would give a portion of the clothing issued to them, for both or either of them; and, as in all large communities, there were amongst our prisoners some rascals who would steal the clothing of their sleeping comrades and sell them likewise to the guard. Colonel Von Schrader and myself remonstrated several times to Lieutenant Bossieux, and he put several of his men in irons for having bought clothing from our prisoners, but the evil could not be stopped by us.

I have often been present at guard mounting in Belle Isle, and remarked the relieved party (sometimes half of them) would have either U. S. blankets, overcoats or pantaloons, and the relieving party of that day would come off duty the next morning similarly supplied with new U. S. clothes. These facts, of course, not being generally known to our fellow prisoners, and from the barred windows of the Libby seeing a very large number of the guard dressed in U. S. uniforms, they came to the very natural conclusion that the rebel government was robbing us to clothe their own men.

The rebel authorities have never given to Colonel Boyd or Colonel Von Schrader or myself (that I am aware of,) the invoices which, I suppose both the government and the U. S. Sanitary Commission must have

sent with the goods. I asked Major Turner if he had those invoices; he replied he had not seen them. I inquired also of Richard Turner in regard to them, but he rudely told me that it was not my business. From this reason I was unable to find out how many boxes were sent to us.

MAKING SHOES.

My narrative now soon comes to a close. Towards the latter part of November I was superseded as Commissary of Distribution by order of General J. H. Winder. Two causes originated it. The first was this: The rebels came one day to Belle Isle, and paroled four hundred men to make shoes for their army, and intimated that they would come again in a few days to parole several hundred more for the same object. I decided at once to do what I considered the duty of a U. S. officer, and interfere in this matter. I sent for several of the chiefs of squads, and told them to inform the men that by going to work for the rebels they were breaking their oath towards the U. S. government, and were helping instead of fighting the enemy of their country; that they would be all liable to be court-martialed for it as soon as they reached our lines, and that I considered it my duty to inform them of it. These sergeants went at once to see their men, and the result was that when the rebels came the second time, they could not get a single one, and soon they discovered the reason of it.

The second cause for which I was superseded is the following. One morning, rather earlier than usual, we were ordered out of our room for the purpose of having it scrubbed by the negroes. The overseer who had charge of the negroes (always with a stick in his hands), came to the corner where I had my quarters, and two buckets of water were thrown on the floor by his negroes before I was aware of their presence. In the haste of leaving the room my friend and messmate, Lieutenant Morley, of the 12th Pennsylvania cavalry, had left a piece of ham on the shelf, within reach of any un-

scrupulous hand which chose to take it. I called him back and told him to put it out of reach, as I was as much afraid of negro thieves as of white ones. The overseer, whom I had not perceived was behind me, heard the remark and applied the meaning to himself. To my surprise he put one hand on my shoulder and made use of the following language: God d—m you, do you mean that I am a thief? If a hot iron had touched my skin it would not have maddened me more than his insolent touch did. I turned myself towards him, and in a second I had him by the throat with both my hands, down he went on the floor, and I struck him many times as hard as I could on his face, until my rage was satisfied. The negroes were jubilant, and of course nobody interfered to help the overseer. I was called down stairs in Major Turner's office, where I explained the whole affair, and though I was not punished bodily, my supercedure took place on that very morning.

From November to March, 1864, I was not allowed to leave for a single moment the Libby prison, and when they began to parole and send North some officers, all the other colonels but two were sent North before me; though I had been a prisoner longer than any of them. Colonel Robert Ould, the rebel Commissioner, to whom I was obnoxious, said that he did not want to send me North at all, but he would keep me in prison as long as he liked; but he was nevertheless soon afterwards compelled to send me, as Colonel Jack Brown, of the 59th Georgia regiment was sent South conditionally, that if he could not get me exchanged for him, he was to return North and be kept as long as I was held by the rebel authorities.

LOUIS PALMA DI CESNOLA,

Late Colonel 4th N. Y. Cav.

New York, 13th Feb., 1865.

City and County of New York, ss.

Sworn to before me,

JOHN ROGERS,

Commissioner of Deeds.

Dated at NEW YORK, Feb. 15, 1865.

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CHIEF JUSTICE CHASE AND THE UNITED STATES SANITARY COMMISSION.

On taking the chair at the annual meeting of the National Freedman's Relief Association, held in the hall of the House of Representatives, at Washington City, February 26, 1865, the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, Salmon P. Chase, referred to the Sanitary Commission as follows:—

This war, now waged for national unity, is marked by peculiar characteristics. The praise of our brave army and navy is upon all lips. The endurance and patriotism of the heroic people, which has never faltered in its resolve to maintain, at whatever cost, the integrity of the American republic, furnish to this, and will furnish to all aftercoming generations, objects of wonder and topics of eulogy. The vast energies and the vast resources which have been called into action, puzzle the statesmen and economists of the old world and astonish our own.

But these, I think, will not hereafter be regarded as the most peculiar characteristics of this war. Men of thought, and especially men who recognize the providence of God in the affairs of men, cannot fail to observe that it is distinguished by great charities even more than by great achievements.

What age before this age, and what country besides our country, ever witnessed such an organization as that of the Sanitary Commission? What needs have been supplied; what wants relieved; what wounds healed; what evils averted, by the activity, wisdom, and unflagging zeal of this admirable organization, fostered and sustained by the people, and recognized and sided by the government.

DISABLED AND DISCHARGED.

At a meeting of the Standing Committee of the United States Sanitary Commission, held February 24, 1865:

Resolved, That the United States Sanitary Commission, deeply convinced of the

importance of providing from time to time, as its funds will allow, shelter and protection for disabled and discharged soldiers, will from this date consider itself authorized to devote any portion of its funds to this purpose; and that due notification be made of this resolution in the *Bulletin, Reporter*, and its usual advertising mediums.

J. FOSTER JENKINS,
General Secretary.

No. 823 Broadway, New York.

IMPORTANT TESTIMONIAL BY QUARTER-MASTER GENERAL M. C. MEIGS.

QUARTER MASTER GENERAL'S OFFICE,
WASHINGTON, D. C., Feb. 20, 1865. }

DR. J. S. NEWBERRY,

Sect. Western Dept. U. S. San. Com.

DEAR SIR:—I have received and thank you for your Report of 22d October last. It is an honorable record. I notice particularly the value of the hospital gardens. Remembering the scarcity of all provisions, except the substantial parts of the army ration, and even of those at the time I met you at Chattanooga in the winter of 1863. I read with gratification the statement of the quantity of esculents which your gardens, established the next spring, produced for the sufferers in hospital.

I endeavored while at Chattanooga to have arrangements made for cultivation during the ensuing spring and summer, but found every one too much occupied with the sterner work of war to be willing to devote time and labor to raising at that warlike centre a portion of the supplies which, when brought from the distant North, cost so much and so much interfered with the transportation of men and munitions.

I hope that these gardens will be continued, and that the Sanitary Commission, which is free from the pressure of the sterner duties of the soldiers, will continue to give its attention to extending this cultivation for their benefit.

I am very truly and respectfully,

Your obedient servant,

M. C. MEIGS.

Quarter-Master General and Brevet Major General.

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