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A VISIT TO FORT DONELSON, TENN.,

FOR THE

Relief of the Wounded of Feb'y 15, 1862:

A LETTER,

BY DR. J. S. NEWBERRY,

ASSOCIATE SECRETARY.

REV. H. W. BELLOWS, D. D.,

President U. S. Sanitary Commission.

DEAR SIR: As you have doubtless learned from my letters to the Secretary, I was in Kentucky when the country was electrified by the news of the taking of Fort Donelson. When on the point of starting for the scene of action with one of our inspectors, and such stores as I could command, I received a despatch to the effect that the Cincinnati Branch Commission had chartered a steamer, freighted it with surgeons, nurses, and hospital stores, and had already started down the river.

On the arrival at Louisville of the Allen Collier—for that was the name of the relief boat—I accepted the cordial invitation which I received, joined the expedition, and

taking some twenty boxes of hospital stores kindly placed at my disposal by Mrs. Bishop Smith, I went on board.

Mr. James A. Blake, President of the Indianapolis Branch of our Commission, and Mr. F. C. Sessions, of the Columbus Branch, also joined the party at this time.

I found on the steamer some of the most eminent surgeons and highly respected citizens of Cincinnati—a warm-hearted band of Christian men, all eager to do something toward relieving the suffering known to exist among the poor fellows who had gained for us so great a victory at such a cost. From the high character of these men, and the admirable spirit which animated them, as well as from all the circumstances attending the fitting out of the expedition, I could not but regard it as one of the most delightful of all the many exhibitions of the patriotism and refined humanity of our people which this war has called out, and as a most gratifying proof of the vigor and value of our organization, now spread over all the loyal States.

The history of the expedition up to the time when I joined it is no less interesting and suggestive than that in which I bore part, and you will perhaps not be unwilling to hear it as it was repeated to me :

“Before hearing of the surrender of Fort Donelson, but knowing that a desperate conflict was impending there, the Secretary called a meeting of the Sanitary Commission for 9 o'clock on Monday morning. At this meeting a committee was appointed who were authorized to charter a steamer, load it with hospital stores, and engage as many surgeons and nurses as they might deem proper. While the committee was engaged in selecting these from the hundreds who tendered their services, the news came that the fort was taken. The city was at once in a blaze of enthusiasm. The

citizens knowing that the Commission was about sending a steamer to the relief of the wounded, vied with each other in their efforts to help on the enterprise. The members of the Commission were accosted in the streets, or called into places of business, and checks for \$25 or \$50 thrust into their hands by men from whom much smaller donations would have been regarded as highly liberal. In two hours, almost without solicitation, \$3,000 were collected and paid into the treasury, to defray the expenses of the expedition. Had more been required, it would have been as freely given.

“From the fact that all the steamers at Cincinnati had been pressed into the service of the government for the transport of troops, it was only after many difficulties and delays that a proper one was found, and the consent of Gen. Buell to its use obtained by telegraph from Louisville.

“At 5 p. m. the steamer was secured, and at midnight she started on her way.”

Our voyage down the Ohio and up the Cumberland was without incident, but in many respects most interesting. Our company, composed mainly of men of intelligence and cultivation, harmonized by their humane and patriotic mission, furnished the elements of most pleasant social intercourse, in which the hours passed rapidly away; and at evening the circle of earnest worshippers who gathered into the cabin to listen to the reading of the Scriptures, and to join in prayer for the wounded and dying on the battlefield, formed a scene strangely new to the traveler on our western waters, and one that will long linger in the memories of those present.

During the trip our whole force was classified in squads of surgeons and nurses, so that our work might be systematically, rapidly, and thoroughly done.

On our arrival at Fort Donelson we found ourselves surrounded by all the realities and many of the horrors of war. The batteries, the entrenchments, the white tents of our victorious army which covered the hills for miles around, the battle-field with its unburied dead, strewn with arms, clothing, and accoutrements, everywhere showing traces of the death storm by which it had been swept. All these, and a thousand other things which told each its story in the unwritten history of this desperate and all-important conflict, were looked upon with a deep and painful interest. But we had not come to gratify mere curiosity, however natural, and the wounded, who were then being brought in on litters or in ambulances, demanded and received our first thoughts and attention.

Immediately on our arrival a committee of the Commission visited the headquarters of the Commanding General and obtained passes "through all lines at will." The committee also reported to the Medical Director, stated the object of our visit, tendered the services of surgeons and nurses, and proffered the supplies which had been brought. All these offers were accepted, and an appointment made for 3 o'clock the same afternoon at which time duties were to be assigned us where assistance was most needed.

During the interval we had time to look around us and ascertain, by our own observations, the condition of the wounded, and nature and extent of their wants.

Our steamer was moved alongside of the "City of Memphis," on which were, at the time, two hundred and fifty or three hundred of the wounded, while a few paces below us lay the Fanny Bullitt, on which were nearly as many more. To both of these boats, we, with some little difficulty, obtained access, and were enabled to make a cursory examination of their inmates.

We found the cabin floors thickly crowded with the wounded men, and others were constantly arriving from the various places where they had been deposited when taken from the field of battle. When received they were laid side by side in juxtaposition, part on the floor and part on mattresses. Our examination showed that the individual condition of the wounded men was deplorable. Some were just as they had been left by the fortune of war (four days before;) their wounds, as yet, undressed, smeared with filth and blood, and all their wants unsupplied. Others had had their wounds dressed one, two, or three days before. Others, still, were under the surgeon's hands, receiving such care as could be given them by men overburdened by the number of their patients, worn out by excessive and long-continued labor, without an article of clothing to give to any for a change, or an extra blanket, without bandages or dressings, with but two ounces of cerate to three hundred men, with few medicines and no stimulants, and with nothing but corn meal gruel, hard bread, and bacon, to dispense as food.

As the condition of the wounded testified, and the frank admission of the surgeons proved, here was an earnest appeal for all our sympathies, all our efforts, all our stores—the very suffering and destitution, indeed, which we had pictured in our minds, and we had come so far to relieve.

At 3 o'clock the Medical Director failed to appear, nor did we see anything of him till dark. Meantime some of the party making an effort to go again into the cabin of the City of Memphis, were asked by the sentinel if they were members of the Sanitary Commission, and upon answering in the affirmative they were informed that their orders were to deny them admittance. We were therefore left to our own devices to pass the afternoon. Eager and impatient as

we were to do something for the poor fellows whose wants were so pressing, and who were now so near to us and our stores, we were rigidly excluded from them.

It will not seem strange to you that this discourteous rejection of our proffered aid grated most harshly on our feelings, and in the circumstances appeared, not only ungenerous to us and the great body of loyal citizens whom we represented, but what was of more consequence, as unkind, and even cruel to the sufferers to whom we were bearing the fruits of their sympathy and affection.

In the evening the Medical Director, with several surgeons of his staff, came on board our boat, and announced that we were to place ourselves under the direction of Dr. B., a civil surgeon from Cincinnati, who had come up with us from Smithland. This arrangement was objected to by all the surgeons of our party as disrespectful to themselves, and an unwarranted appropriation of the whole expedition by one who had no claim on its *materiel* or *personnel*. After some discussion this proposition was withdrawn, and by 9½ o'clock most of us were systematically distributed through the two boats, assuming the care of the wounded through the night, and giving the attendants the rest they so much required. Meantime several of our number had commenced opening the boxes of hospital stores, and pouring into the two hospital boats a constant stream of bedding, clothing, surgical dressings, medicines, stimulants, and food. In this way the entire night was passed.

On Friday morning, and even during the evening previous, the surgeons of the regiment encamped near, hearing of our arrival with supplies, began to visit our boat, asking for medical and hospital stores, of which they reported a general and urgent want. It is scarcely necessary to say that

they were supplied with a liberal hand, greatly to their satisfaction.

Application had been made to the Medical Director to permit 75 to 100 wounded to be transferred to the Allen Collier, to be cared for by the surgeons of our party, and to be transported to Cincinnati, if possible; or, if that was not permitted, to any place which might be specified on the banks of the Ohio. On Friday the proposition was, with considerable hesitation, accepted, and after noon the removal began. While this was being effected I took occasion to go over the battle-field and visit the camps of several regiments which had taken an active part in the fight. During my absence, as I learned on my return at evening to the steamer, Dr. H., the Medical Director, had again visited the Allen Collier, and this time, to the surprise of all, in a most unamiable mood. Irritated by the objection made the evening previous to his disposition of the surgeons and nurses, by the liberal manner in which the stores on board had been issued to meet any real want—or by some cause unknown, he forgot at once all the dignity of his official position, and the proprieties of gentlemanly intercourse. Perhaps some explanation of his conduct may be found in the report of the Cincinnati Branch Commission; but I believe to them, as to me, it remains a problem not susceptible of any solution “becoming an officer and a gentleman.”

According to the testimony of all the witnesses of the interview, it would be impossible by any description to give an adequate idea of his arrogant, insulting manner, and I will not sully my paper with the oaths with which each of his sentences was interlarded. He demanded that all stores that we had brought there for distribution should be turned

over to his purveyor, and be distributed only by him; and that one of his surgeons should go on board the Allen Collier take the supervision of the wounded, and the command of our force.

The gentlemen of the Commission, smothering all expression of their deep indignation at such treatment, and consulting only the interests of the poor fellows, some of whom might be saved from death by their intervention, made no reply to the insulting language of the Medical Director, nor opposition to his authority, but turned over to him nearly all the stores on board, and soon after my return started down the river.

Of this interview I had no knowledge until we were under weigh. Had I been present, and the facts been such as were reported me, I should have felt constrained to refer this whole matter to the general commanding the department.

It is only just to state, that with this exception we were most kindly and cordially received and treated by all the surgeons whom we met at Fort Donelson.

The eighty-one wounded men who were taken on board the Allen Collier were sadly in want of immediate surgical attendance, which was thoroughly and systematically given them. Each was placed in a clean and comfortable bed; their soiled, and bloody clothing removed; they were washed with warm water throughout, including their feet; new and clean underclothing, with socks, and, when needed, slippers were furnished to all; food, nourishing and palatable, and delicacies to which they had long been strangers, were supplied to them. In short, in all things they were nursed and served as though they had been our brothers and sons.

These men, with the exception of one who died of his

wounds on the way, were transported safely to Cincinnati, where they were transferred to the hospitals in charge of Dr. Moore, in whose kind care, and under the watchful eye of the Sanitary Commission, they will want nothing.

I have thus presented a brief and imperfect history of *one* of the parties organized for the relief of the wounded at Fort Donelson; but the history of this expedition, however suggestive it may be, can give you but a very inadequate idea of the breadth and depth of enthusiasm and sympathy which the siege and conquest of Fort Donelson called out in all parts of the Western States, and comes far short of expressing the promptness and energy with which measures were taken by State officers, city authorities, our various Branch Commissions and auxiliaries, societies and individuals, for the transmission of succor to the sufferers.

From Ohio, beside the Cincinnati expedition, accompanied by Mr. Sessions, of the Columbus Branch, and myself, Dr. Weber, the Surgeon General, started at once, and did good service in the case of the wounded at Cairo and Paducah. From the Cleveland Soldiers Aid Society also 100 boxes of hospital stores were shipped within twenty-four hours after the reception of the telegraphic requisitions of Dr. Weber and myself.

From Indiana, Mr. Blake, President of the Indianapolis Branch Commission, accompanied us, as I have stated; and Governor Morton went himself with a number of surgeons and nurses to Cairo and thence to the Fort.

Governor Yates, of Illinois, was equally prompt in hastening to the assistance of the Illinois troops, who bore so important and gallant a part in the contest; and the Chicago Branch Commission, on this occasion, exhibited the energy and efficiency that might have been expected from those

who had for months, almost alone, supplied all needed extraneous aid to the large force stationed in the vicinity of Cairo. Dr. Aigner I found at the Fort on my arrival, acting for the Commission with his usual energy and discretion. Dr. Douglass came up a few hours later, and we left both these gentlemen there when we started on our return.

I cannot conclude my letter without referring to the heroism displayed by our soldiers; their bravery in the fight; their fortitude when wounded. Of the former, you have already had some description, and doubtless shared the thrill of pleasure and admiration which ran through the land when it was known that our young soldiers had not only exhibited all the steadiness of veterans, but by their gallantry had given the lie to southern boastings, and had gained for themselves an honorable place among the heroes of history. Of the latter, nothing has been said; but, to my mind, the examples of patient and even cheerful endurance of suffering, which I saw among the wounded, were scarcely less impressive than the scenes of the battle-field, to which I have alluded. Among several hundreds whose injuries were, for the most part, serious, I scarcely heard a groan, or even a sigh. All were cheerful, and so elated with their success that their own fate seemed a matter of comparative indifference. In more than one instance, in view of impending death, the failing powers were rallied to give final expression to sentiments of the loftiest patriotism. I never before fully realized "how sweet and honorable a thing it might be to die for one's country."

Yours, very respectfully,

J. S. NEWBERRY,
Assoc. Secretary.

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Author

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