



## April 11, 1863 - Observations on the camp life of Confederate soldiers in Middle Tennessee

Shelbyville, Tenn., April 11, 1863.

. . . I started out by saying that all is quiet here as yet. I should have stated quiet, according to the meaning of the word in this region. That is to say, that whilst our infantry camps continue to be scenes of peace and good humor—the men becoming fat with their long rest, and models of perfection in drill—and whilst the farmers around are hard at work for heavy crops this summer, and tranquility and gaiety prevail on all sides, all is not quiet along the immediate front. There our gallant cavalry are hard at work all the time, night and day, sweeping back those little waves of invasion, which if not checked, might open heavy sluices and soon precipitate the whole Northern flood upon us. I am of opinion that our cavalry do not receive a fraction of the praise they are entitled to, because they are not sufficiently heard from. No rest for them. No fattening up in camp and daily exercise in drill, for months, for them. No grand reviews with brass bands playing and flags flying, big Generals present, and ladies around for them. No—nothing of the sort.

They are chiefly heard of as playing a secondary part around the edges of big battles, and making raids into the enemy's country; for all which I admit they receive full credit. But those seem to be the cavalryman's only hope of renown. He gets no praise for being constantly in the saddle, or for constantly riding and exposing his life just as much as he ever did in a big battle or in a raid.

Every day the distant rumble of cannon is heard from some part or another of our sixty mile front. The sound is tranquilly heard, maybe in an infantry camp, or among the plowmen in the field; it elicits only the remark—"Skirmishing up at the front," and all goes on as usual. It is forgotten that the few men engaged in these skirmishes are fighting about as hard, individually, as ever any equal number of individuals fought in the solid phalanx of battle. Perhaps only two light batteries, and not more than two light batteries, and not more than two hundred mounted men are engaged in the exchange of cannon ball, shell and minnie ball; most of these miss, as in greater engagements, but once in a while something hits.—A horse goes down under his rider—a piece of shell broke somebody's arm, or tears away his leg—the shrill whiz of a minnie ball is heard to cease with a little "thud," and a large bearded man is seen to drop his gun and fall from his horse limberly, without exclamation.—The wounded are supported away on horseback; so is the limber man, whose placid face proves that he died very suddenly. After a while a widow weeps somewhere, but the world never hears anything about it—it was only "a skirmish up at the front." And so of lesser skirmishes, where small scouting parties meet. Many of the noblest and bravest spirits of this war have thus fallen; but no halo of battle glory brightens their names—they fell "skirmishing up at the front."

Between outpost, picket and mount duty, precious little rest does the cavalryman see. If no skirmish requires his aid, there is the tiresome and stealthy ride through the thickets, over the hills and down the valleys, or the





weary, silent waiting at the deserted cross road or lonesome hill top; through sunshine and darkness, through all weathers; no tent to shelter them from the drenching rain, no fire to thaw their numbed fingers or warm their scarce, scanty rations. Cavalry men, this last winter have been frozen to death in their saddles, and numbers have received frost bites that they will carry to their graves. Once in a while, the cavalry man is sent to the reserve camp for a few days' rest, not for himself but for his horse. His greatest and most constant care is to keep his horse shod and otherwise in order; for he well knows that if once he loses his horse his glory is gone. Many, in spite of their best care, are wearing out their horses, and being dismounted and sent to the infantry; a stern necessity of war, anything but agreeable to those who have learned how to fight on horseback. But of cavalry men and their hardships, and the unappreciativeness of the people for whom they are fighting, enough for the present.

My neighbor, old Brown, told me this morning there was a "wedding" at his house the night before. There have lately been many "weddings" of the kind referred to by Brown, in this part of the country. Let me describe one of them.

A brave soldier, after a year or a year and a half's marching and hard fighting, hears that his wife is very sick or in some other trouble, at his home "away down South." He applies for a short furlough. It is bluntly refused. He becomes down-hearted, and more than ever prays for a speedy ending of the war. At last he is wounded in battle, or stricken down by disease. Again he asks for a furlough; he is very sure of getting well faster at home than in a hospital; and again the boon is cruelly denied. He is sent off, half dead and despairing, to a hospital at Chattanooga or Atlanta, where he is well cared for. But for all this he pines for weeks; and perhaps his worst pining is that of the heart for "home, sweet home":

"Though doctor and nurse are here  
Within this dreary confine,  
There are never the faces to cheer  
A weary soul like mine.  
It's oh, for a mother's care,  
A sister's affectionate zeal,  
A wife's deep love and devotion rare,  
To banish the pain I feel!"

Finally he gets well and is sent back to duty. His home now seems to him as some far off dream of happiness, which perhaps he may never realize. The end of the war looks farther off than ever—so does his home. But he goes on bravely with his duties, little dreaming of the surprise that is preparing for him. A lady, pale and fatigued after some days and nights of the crowded and horrible travel of our Southern railroad reaches Tullahoma—reaches Shelbyville. Some kind soldier, a fellow traveler, carries her carpet bag and basket, and inquires about town until some citizen directs where the lady can get accommodations for a week or so. The kind volunteer assists her to Smith's, or Brown's, or some other good country place between town and





camp. She pens a note, and after some trouble manages to have it sent out to camp. The note gets mislaid; but our soldier receives word that a lady at Smith's or Brown's wishes to see him. He obtains a short leave, and comes flying in, his horse and heart in an equal gallop. "Can it be she?" he asks himself—"she never wrote she was coming!" He dismounts at the gate, hastily flings the rein over a post, double quicks it up the yard, and greets the door with a nervous "rat-tat tat." The door opens—the servant asks him into the parlor—he enters—a lady rises (she is not pale now)—and the next moment, with only the exclamations, "John!" "Mary!" her face is buried in the bosom of his woolen shirt, whilst his manly arms, that so oft in his dreams had clasped the empty atmosphere, are now at last firmly locked round the real thing itself!

Such meetings as these are what the people around here have got into the habit of calling "weddings." The name isn't such a bad one, is it? Wouldn't mind having one or two such weddings myself!

A peculiar institution of our army here is the "colored wing"—the military niggers—I mean the officers' servants. They dress well, ride thousand dollar horses, smoke two-bit cigars, live on the fat of the land, get up five dollar dancing parties, put on airs over the country niggers, break the wenches' hearts, and lay over the army and mankind in general. So far as ease, comfort and pleasure go, they seem to be the finest gentlemen in the army. They observe keenly the distinctions of rank; a General's nigger won't associate with the Colonel's or Captain's nigger if he can help it; and they look upon the white foot soldiers as the wretchedest of mankind. Very often a tired and dusty volunteer, trudging along the road with his gun and knapsack, hears a clatter behind him, steps aside, and a dandy nigger gallops by without turning his head, stiff and dignified as a Major General. The soldier looks as if he would rather make a target of the saucy black rascal; but as he happens to be quite as rich a man as the nigger's master, and has pet niggers of his own at home, he doesn't do it. Here's a specimen of the stunning process adopted by some of the officers niggers. Old country nigger with his jaw hanging over a fence, stupidly staring at the crowds passing up and down the road. Young dandy nigger in gold lace comes clattering along on a spanking stallion. Sees the old one and reins in suddenly, with this question: "Nigga, has you seen Gen'l Bragg pas dis way?"

Old one grants a surly "no," and dandy travel on as though he were going to a council of war. He doesn't know Bragg from Adam, and has no business with him. The old one stares after him in evident disgust, tintured, however, with a wonder whether that whipper-snapper is Bragg's Adjutant General, or only some Brig.-General or Colonel. A week or two since the niggers had a grand shindy at McMinnville; admittance five dollars, to keep common niggers out. Two splendid military niggers, strangers to each other, got in each other's way whilst bucking up to the bell-wench of the ball; they put on tall airs and tried to look each other down; but they were of equal grit and neither backed down. At last, in a manner intended to crush, one asks, "Who is you?" "I'se boss barba' on Gen. Morgan's staff!" was the spunky reply, "who is you?" Drawing himself





up to the utmost stretch, the other answered, "Ise boss barba' on Gen. Wheeler's staff; I ranks you, I does; you commands a division, but I commands a corps!" The Morgan nigger "went under," and his superior officer sailed off with the wench. Of a verity, these army niggers are a gay set of birds.

I notice that my friend "Ora," in speaking of the victory of the 18th-20th Louisiana regiment, in the challenge drill at Tullahoma, dubs it the "Irish Creole" regiment. You should know the regiment better, Ora should know enough not to call Creoles Irish, or Irish Creoles, and not leave out the Americans, Germans, Dutch, Prussians and others, that assist in the composition of this cosmopolitan and truly model regiment. Are Col. Richard and Lieut. Von Zanken "Irish Creole" names? The epithet seems to infer a little disparagement because being a Louisiana regiment it is not composed exclusively of Creoles; this is unjust. The regiment should rather be the more admired in that it so truly represents the mixed character of the population of New Orleans, whilst typifying its loyalty; showing how completely men of different nationalities can become welded together as one man in the one great cause. Call it "Irish Creole" or whatever else you choose, this is a true Louisiana regiment, reflecting honor upon the noble old State that sent it forth, and upon the army to which it is attached.

I. G.

*Mobile Register and Advertiser*, April 19, 1863.<sup>Note 1</sup>

**Note 1:** As cited in: <http://www.uttyl.edu/vbetts>.

