

A DIFFICULT PROBLEM.



"Santa Claus would be puzzled to get anything into my stocking; 'cause why I haven't got any."

ON THE RAPPAHANNOCK.

CHRISTMAS DAY, 1862.

By John R. Paxton, Private, Company G, 140th Pennsylvania Volunteers.

There was my old comrade, Sergt. Nelson, who had gathered somewhat of evil in the army, whose Christian virtues were not highly polished, and who, on occasion, dropped into profanity as Wegg did into poetry. Now I wonder which Nelson God will keep, and which Nelson he will throw away—the rough soldier, or the man at Cold Harbor who said, "Boys, do you hear Rebout and Stone calling our names and begging for water?" We left them at the foot of the hill wounded that afternoon when we charged and were repulsed. "Boys, its mighty risky. There is no trace to-night, and them rats shoot about as fine by starlight as by day. But I'm going out to them. You see, if you and I were lying over there with a hole through us and we called for water and no one come, though you heard us, we would curse you all. Who will go with me?" "I, sergeant." "And I." They went, and two of them were killed. I wonder which Nelson God will keep, which throw away—the Nelson who was no saint, or the Nelson who died for man, like Jesus Christ!

I wonder which man is me, and which will come to the front and be on top at judgment: this me in the study here, with an open Bible before him, who flatly contradicts the other me, who shivered with cold on the Rappahannock twenty-five years ago.

It is such a funny world! You and I load our friends down with our aches and pains, troubles, and ills, but when a rich old uncle dies and leaves us half a million, we do not load that on them. Oh, no. But here am I preaching, so strong is habit. Yet which is me—this gentle, meek, apologetic clergyman, or that other me of a quarter of a century ago that other me who wore that faded blue roundabout hanging on my study wall, with a lieutenant's shoulder straps on it, who wore that sword and belt there before my eyes? Which is me—this man acquainted with weakness and piety and alms and grief, or that me of the sword and brass buttoned jacket on the wall, who was acquainted with war, devils, death, reckless daring, love's young dream! Here a happy thought strikes me: to try on that soldier's jacket and buckle on again that sword. I am going to get into that jacket, so faded, so small for me now; I am going to buckle on that sword, if it does compel crowding, bad language, rebellion, pains, and being carried off the field swooning, as some ladies are betimes, because of the uproar and rage of the uncommoded guests within. Well, it happened on this wise that I found myself shivering on the banks of the Rappahannock on Christmas Day, 1862, enlisted for three years or during the war, food for villainous salt-peter.



"A HAPPY THOUGHT STRIKES ME."

I started for Richmond in July, 1862, a lad 25 years old, a junior in college, and chafing to be at it—to double quick it after John Brown's soul, which, since it did not require a knapsack, or three day's rations, or a canteen, or a halt during the night for sleep, was always marching on. On the night before Christmas, 1862, I was a dejected young patriot, wishing I hadn't done it, shivering in the open weather a mile back of the Rappahannock, on the reserve picket, and exposed to a wet snowstorm. There was not a stick of wood within five miles of us; all cut down, even the roots of trees dug up and burned. We lay down on our rubber blankets, pulled our woolen blankets over us, spooned as close as we could get, to steal warmth from our comrades, and tried not to cry.

Next morning the snow lay heavy and deep, and the men, when I waked and looked about me, reminded me of a church graveyard in winter. The snow covered us all, and my comrades seemed as if a small cemetery—just like a graveyard and its mounds. "Fall in for picket duty! There, come, Moore, McManus, Paxton, Ferrine, Pollock, fall in!" We fell in, of course. No breakfast; chilled to the marrow; snow a foot deep. We tightened our belts on our empty stomachs, seized our rifles and marched to the river to take our six hours on duty.

It was Christmas Day, 1862. "And so this is war," my old me said to himself, while he paced in the wet snow his two hours on the river's brink. "And I am out here to shoot that lean, lank, coughing, cadaverous looking butternut fellow over the river. So this is war; this is being a soldier; this is the genuine article; this is H. Greeley's 'On to Richmond.' Well, I wish he were only here in my place, running to keep warm; pounding his arms and breast to make the chilled blood circulate. So this is war, tramping up and down this river my fifty yards with wet foot, empty stomach, swollen nose." Also: when lying under the trees in the college campus last June, war meant to me mar-

shal music; gorgeous brigadiers in blue and gold; tall young men in line, shining in brass. War meant to me tumultuous memories of Bunker Hill, Cassa's Tenth Legion, the charge of the 5th Hundred—anything but this. Pah! I wish I were home. Let me see, Home! God's country. A tent!—yes, it is a tent. What are they doing at home? This is Christmas Day, 1862. Home! Well, stockings on the wall, candy, turkey, fun, merry Christmas, and the face of the girl I left behind. Another year? Yes, I couldn't help it; I was only 15, and there was such a contrast between Christmas, 1862, on the Rappahannock, and other Christmases. Yes, there was a girl, too—such sweet eyes; such long lashes; such a low, tender voice! "Come, move quicker! Who goes there?" Shift the rifle from one shoulder to the other.

"Hello, Johnny, what are you up to?" The river was narrow, but deep and swift. It was a wet cold, not a freezing cold. There was no ice—too swift for that.

"Hello, Johnny, what you coughing so for?"

"Yank, with no overcoat, shoes full of holes, nothing to eat but parched corn and tobacco, and with the derved Yankee snow a foot deep there is nothin' left—notin' but to get up a cough by way of protestin' against this infernal treatment of the body. We us, Yank, all have a cough over here, and there's no sayin' which will run us to hole first, the cough or your bullets."

The snow still fell; the keen wind, raw and fierce, cut to the bone. It was God's worst weather in God's forlornest, blakest spot of ground, that Christmas '62 on the Rappahannock, a half mile below the town of Fredericksburg. But come, pick up your prostrate pluck, you shivering private. Surely there is enough dampness around without adding to it your tears.

"Let's laugh, boys." "Hello, Johnny!" "Hello yourself, Yank!" "Merry Christmas, Johnny!" "Same to you, Yank!" "Say, Johnny, got anything to trade?" "Fetched corn and tobacco—the size of our Christmas, Yank."



"YANK, NO OVERCOAT."

"All right; you shall have some of our coffee and sugar and pork. Boys, find the boats!" "Such boats! I see the children sailing them on the small lakes in our Central Park. Some Yankee, desperately hungry for tobacco, invented them for trading with the Johnnies. They were hid away under the banks of the river for successive relays of pickets.

We got out the boats. An old handkerchief answered for a sail. We loaded them with coffee, sugar, pork, and set the sail, and watched them slowly creep to the other shore. And the Johnnies! To see them crowd the bank, and push and scramble to be first to seize the boats, going into the water, and stretching out their long arms! Then when they pulled the boats ashore, and stood in a group over the cargo, and to hear their exclamations: "Hurrah for hog!" "Say, that's not roasted rye, but genuine coffee. Smell it, you uns." "And sugar, too." Then they divided the consignment. They laughed and shouted, "Reckon you uns been good to us uns this Christmas Day, Yanks." Then they put parched corn, tobacco, ripe persimmons, into the boats, and sent them back to us. And we chewed the parched corn, smoked real Virginia leaf, ate persimmons, which, if they weren't very filling, at least contracted our stomachs to the size of our Christmas dinner. And so the day passed. We shouted, "Merry Christmas, Johnny." They shouted, "Same to you, Yank." And we forgot the biting wind, the chilling cold; we forgot those men over there were our enemies, whom it might be our duty to shoot before evening.

We had bridged the river—spanned the bloody chasm. We were brothers, not foes, waving salutations of good will in the name of the Babe of Bethlehem, on Christmas Day, '62. At the very front of the opposing armies the Christ Child struck a truce for us—broke down the wall of partition, became our peace. We exchanged gifts. We shouted greetings back and forth. We kept Christmas, and our hearts were lighter for it and our shivering bodies were not quite so cold. Go thou and do likewise; push no poor debtor, prosecute no quarrel, bear no grudge, at Christmas time; forgive your enemies, remember your mercies and do not brood over your misfortunes, at Christmas time. If the times are hard do not let the children know it, or Lazarus on your doorstep become aware of it, at Christmas time, to his deeper despair. Cannot you be cheerful and brave by your firesides, as we soldiers were on the Rappahannock on Christmas Day in '62, shouting good will to rebels on the opposite shore? Let us all shake hands on Christmas!



"WE HAD BRIDGED THE RIVER."

Day. Let us all touch elbows and share with our neighbor who needs us most. Then make a truce with enemies, with care, with fears, with tears and sorrow, and let joy be unfurled on Christmas Day. Let justice soften to mercy. Let not hate harden into wrong, but be transformed into love. Let anger

cease, let wrath be forgotten, let quarrels be reconciled.

Let charity dispense bounty. Let the rich men love the poor. Let the lap of childhood be filled with plenty. Let all Rappahannocks of estrangement, separation, bitterness, unequal lots, opposing interests, be bridged by the Babe of Bethlehem on Christmas Day of '62. And "be ye kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." There, I am preaching again, in a secular journal of civilization. Yet I can't help it. This Christ born me has thrown off and left behind the other me, the old me, who followed Grant and Hancock to Richmond in the wild, mad days of turbulent youth. I have taken off that faded blue jacket, and can stretch my arms; I have unbuttoned that worn belt, and can breathe freely. Come, jacket; come, sword—hang again on the wall. You are my old me; but the present, real me is a man of peace and acquainted with grief; not so happy as a saint as he was as a soldier, but still trying to do his work, since God didn't send for him at Gettysburg.—Harper's Weekly.

IN KENTUCKY AND TENNESSEE.

How Christmas Day is Celebrated in Those States.

Christmas day is not only the most widely and universally observed holiday in the Christian calendar, but it is also susceptible of a greater variety of observance than perhaps any other holiday. Santa Claus and the Christmas tree are known and loved of all children. In Kentucky and other southern states the day is ushered in with a gunpowder accompaniment. In the north the Fourth of July is made horrible by the booming of cannon and the rattle of firecrackers. In the south these are reserved for Christmas morning. Among the country and village population Christmas is the occasion of a general turnout in fields and woods with guns and dogs. On that day of all days do the rabbits, squirrels and quail find themselves pursued by about every man and boy, both white and colored, who owns or can borrow an old shotgun, blunderbuss or shooting iron of any kind, and the fields and woods resound from morn till night with the echoes of exploding gunpowder as the hunters stalk up the hapless game. The dogs lend their quota to the day's noise and excitement, baying on the trail of frightened foxes and rabbits.

In Tennessee the wise men who made the laws in the early days of the state's existence recognized the merit of marksmanship, and to encourage this accomplishment enacted a law exempting wagers on marksmanship from the general penalties against other species of gambling. So that the men of a village or farm community may congregate and put up money, a quarter of beef or a turkey, as the prize to be carried off by the best shot. The target is often the top of a paper cap box about as large in diameter as a silver quarter, and the distance ranges from twenty-five to 100 steps. The guns used are long single barrel muzzle loading rifles. If the match is to be shot off hand (resting the gun against the shoulder without a rest) the distance is seldom greater than twenty-five paces, and even at that distance the bullets are often bunched from a dozen rifles into a space which can be covered with a silver dollar.

These rifle shooting matches are now largely reserved for the Christmas day, and are looked forward to all the year round. On these occasions all the young men who boast of their ability to "cut the bull's eye three times out of five" gather to banter and take the conceit out of such as think themselves crack shots.

Christmas night is largely given up to "fiddlin' and dancin'" in the homes of the hospitable backwoods southerners, and even in the towns and villages it is a very common custom to have a dance on Christmas night.

She Spoke Not for Herself.



"Is you 'aid of Santa Claus, mamma? If you is I will come in your bed."

CHRISTMAS IN OLDEN TIME.

Heap on more wood, the wind is chill; But let it whistle as it will; We'll keep our Christmas merry still. And well our Christian sires of old Loved, when the year its course had rolled, And brought blithe Christmas back again, With all its hospitable train. Domestic and religious rite Gave honor to the holy night. On Christmas Eve the bells were rung; On Christmas Eve the mass was sung; That only night in all the year Saw the dim priest the chalice rear. The dame donned her kirtle sheen; The hall was dressed with holly green; Forth to the wood did merry men go To gather in the mistletoe. Then opened wide the baron's hall To vassal, tenant, serf and all; Power laid his rod of rule aside, And Ceremony doffed his pride. The heir, with roses in his shoes, That night might village partner choose; The lord undergoing share The vulgar game of "post and pair." All hail with uncontrolled delight And general voices the happy right That to the cottage, as the crown, Brought tidings of salvation down. —Sir Walter Scott.

CHRISTMAS THE HAPPIEST.

Among all our holidays Christmas is the happiest. Other days, like the Fourth of July and Decoration Day, have a patriotic association which is inspiring, and New Year's Day has an advisory significance which is pathetic. But the tradition of Christmas is more universal and ideal than that of other holidays, because it is the feast of fraternity, of human sympathy and helpfulness. Not only is its sentiment glory to God, but its distinctive gospel is peace on earth and good will to man. It is the one day in the year on which selfishness is the most odious sin. Its peculiar observance is obvious, palpable, active thought of others. We all live under the general law of charity and of doing good. But this is the day on which we must make sure that our light shines so that men shall see our good works.—Harper's Weekly.

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