

Charles F. Currie

The Camden County asylum in this county is located about two miles distant from the town of Blackwood. Charles F. Currie continues to be the resident superintendent, and his wife acts as matron.

An amusing story is related by Comrade Charles F. Currie, Fourth New Jersey Volunteers and later of the Signal Corps: One night I was lying in my tent together with my mate, Private Corrigan, peacefully dreaming of home and friends, and with no particular thought of danger, although the Johnnies were not far away, and had been placing batteries in threatening positions all afternoon. Our tent was composed of an ordinary shelter tent placed over an elevated platform about eighteen inches from the ground. Suddenly we were awakened by the scream of a rebel shell, which passed over us and exploded in the woods at no great distance. Corrigan took matters very coolly, to all appearances, and of course I didn't care to show the white feather too quickly; but as shell-followed shell in rapid succession I became alarmed, and upon the first opportunity I quietly slid down to the ground on my side. Whenever it was necessary to make any remark to Corrigan, I would raise my head over to my pillow (a pair of shoes covered with an old fatigue cap), dodging back as quickly as was consistent with soldierly dignity.

I was beginning to really admire the courage and nonchalance of Corrigan, whom I supposed to be lying unconcerned in his bunk, when we happened to pop up our heads at the same time; and I then discovered that he had adopted my own tactics, and was lying flat upon mother earth, except at such times as he was forced to raise his head. Finding that we couldn't fool each other any longer we mutually agreed to strike camp and seek shelter under the over-hanging hillside near by; but I am afraid that each of us lost some faith in the coolness and courage of the other.

While a prisoner in the hands of the rebels at Savage's Station, the rebel officers went through the camp inducing us to trade greenbacks for confederate money to the amount of \$3,000. We were sent from Savage's Station to Libby Prison. Two officers stood at the door and forced us to give up the confederate money. We complained to General Winder, who told us we were not sharp and he could do nothing for us. That was in July, 1862.

CHARLES. F. CURRIE,
Late Corporal Fourth New Jersey Volunteers.
MILLVILLE, NEW JERSEY, July 29, 1867.

COMRADE Charles F. Currie, to whom we are indebted for much valuable information regarding the southern prison pens, paid a visit to his old quarters in Libby Prison in the fall of 1888, just before the building was demolished, and his account thereof is very interesting:

While passing the building one afternoon he observed a number of gentlemen enter, and, joining them, soon found his way to the upper room, and to the very pillar around which he passed so many anxious days and sleepless nights in 1862. He knew exactly the spot on the pillar where he had cut his name, but unfortunately it was too dark to distinguish anything. Striking a match, he made a careful examination, and there, sure enough, was the old inscription—"C. F. Currie, Co. H., 4th N. J. Vol." What a flood of recollections came trooping back, of dismal days and horrible nights—of pain, suffering and hunger—of murdered companions—of all that is ghastly and sorrowful!

But Mr. Currie was not long left to his meditations. The light had attracted the notice of the others, and they soon surrounded him. Some were southerners—a few were Northern men. All were interested in him and in his story. They pressed him for details; they showed the liveliest interest and sympathy, mingled with surprise.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Currie, "if you can find me a shovel, I think I can show you other relics that will be even more interesting."

The shovel was produced, and after scraping away the accumulated dirt of years, Mr. Currie found on the floor the outlines of the old checker-board used by himself and mates twenty-six years before.

"I have no doubt," said Mr. Currie, "that you could find fifty 'charcoal sketches' by scraping all these floors. And another thing: on every brick in these walls, to a height of seven feet from the floor, is inscribed the name, rank and regiment of from one to three Union prisoners."

"It is a pity they are all obliterated," said one of the gentlemen; "but these walls have all been whitewashed several times since the war."

So they had, but careful chipping with a penknife removed the outer scales of whitewash, and underneath, were found the inscriptions as indicated. Every member of the party took a hand in the search, and not one failed to find what he was seeking. Hundreds of names were discovered, as clear and distinct as the day they were inscribed—pathetic mementos of the dark days of 1862-5.

By this time, the party had been joined by a merchant of Richmond, who announced that he had been one of the prison-guards during the war, he was introduced to Mr. Currie, to whom he said:

"Come down to our store and I will show you something that will interest you." The invitation was accepted, and the merchant brought forth an old journal which was used by a general merchandise house in Richmond during 1864-5. How things did run into money

in those days! Fancy paying \$5 a pound for yellow soap, \$9.85 a pound for common lard, \$40 a pound for coffee, \$7.50 per yard for muslin, \$20 each for glass tumblers, \$72 a cord for wood, \$75 for a pair of shoes, \$50 a gallon for molasses, \$17 a pound for sugar, or \$375 a barrel for flour! And yet these are samples of the prices there shown.

The journal showed running accounts with " President" Davis and other high officials of the confederacy, and is a very interesting relic. After much persuasion the merchant was induced to part with the book, and Mr. Currie brought it home as a souvenir.

COMRADE Charles F. Currie, late of Company H, Fourth New Jersey Volunteers, who was confined in the prison pen at Belle Isle during the latter portion of 1862, has recently had a strange experience which is well worth relating: Mr. Currie is now engaged in mercantile pursuits and travels extensively through the south. In December 1888, he chanced to stop at a hotel in a Georgia town. At the supper table his only table-neighbor was a large and fine looking man, whose appearance and manner stamped him as a southerner. During the meal the conversation turned upon the late unpleasantness, and the southerner incidentally mentioned that he was on duty at Belle Isle in 1862.

"I was there myself," said Mr. Currie, "and I have been looking for twenty-six years for one of the officers who was stationed there at that time.

"Who was he," said the stranger, " General Winder?"

"No," said Mr. Currie, "not Winder, but a miserable, contemptible little whelp of a lieutenant who had charge of the Island shortly after I was sent there. If I ever meet him, and I hope I will, either he or I will get ruined for life."

"Why, what did he do to you that caused you to entertain such bitter feelings all these years?" asked the stranger.

"Well, I will tell you," said Currie, " and I think you will agree with me that my hatred is well founded and perfectly excusable. When I was imprisoned at Belle Isle I was suffering from a severe wound in the leg. As soon as I could crawl I asked the surgeon if I could venture to take a bath in the ditch; he gave me permission, only cautioning me to be careful not to stay in too long.

"Well, after many efforts I succeeded in getting into a squad of prisoners who were going down to bathe, under guard of course. We had hardly struck the water when this impudent, insolent, brainless travesty upon man—this upstart lieutenant—appeared on the scene and ordered us all ashore. We obeyed, naturally, but in consequence of my wounded leg and weakness, I was unable to gain the shore as quickly as my comrades. When I passed this contemptible, white-livered scoundrel of an officer he struck me *actually struck me*, sir, with his sword and swore at me roundly for lagging behind the rest. Every fiber of my enfeebled, disabled body rose in indignation and resistance, but I

was helpless and was forced to swallow the indignity as best I could. But the day will come, sir, I hope, when I can repay, measure for measure, the brutal and inhuman treatment I received that day."

The southerner leaned back in his chair with a reminiscent look on his face.

"That was a brutal outrage, sir," said he. "The officer who perpetrated that act richly deserved hanging, and if he had the first instincts of a man, he must have long since repented of his hasty and harsh conduct. I now apologize to you for him, and I hope you will cease to cherish your just resentment."

"Well," said Mr. Currie, " I suppose a quarter of a century is pretty near long enough to retain hard feelings; and if I should ever meet that officer and he appeared to have really regretted his deed, very likely I should readily forgive and forget, if his repentance was evidently sincere."

"Do you recollect the name of this officer?"

"Do I? Indeed I do! It was W____."

"Do I look anything like that man you hate and for whose gore you thirst?"

Currie looked the man over. He was a manly looking fellow with a cheerful, open countenance, the very picture of good health. Moreover, he was six feet tall and weighed in the neighborhood of 25(° pounds. Currie didn't feel like mopping the floor with him.

"No," he exclaimed; "there is not the slightest resemblance."

"Well, I am he," said the southerner, extending his hand. "I recollect the circumstance well. I have never ceased to regret that my youth and zealous hatred caused me to so far forget my manhood. Shall we shake hands and forget, or shall we go outside and fight it out?"

A brave soldier is a charitable enemy. They did not fight it out, but the pair sat up until midnight chatting about old times.

Charles F. Currie, of Camden, N. J., formerly and a member of Company H, Fourth New Jersey Volunteers was confined at Belle Isle for many weary months. We are indebted to comrade Currie for the following very interesting reminiscences, which we give as nearly as possible, *verbatim*:

Tobacco was a luxury greatly craved and almost impossible to get. The possessor of a whole plug, or even a smaller portion, had to guard it as his life.

We were sitting one day near the boundary of the enclosure watching our guards pacing to and fro. One of these guards drew from his pocket a long plug of tobacco, cut off a portion and restored the plug to his pocket. The sight of a whole plug of tobacco was more than exciting—it was maddening; and I plucked up courage as the guard drew near to me to exclaim.

"Lord, I wish some one would give me a chew of tobacco!"

The guard halted.

"Who's that wants er chaw?" he said.

I wasn't long in telling him who it was, and to my intense delight he produced the precious plug, cut it in two in the middle, came to me and handed me one-half and then resumed his beat.

My companions did not belong to my mess—in fact were almost strangers to me; and I knew that my only hope of preserving the treasure lay in flight. I ran like a deer until I reached our own quarters and sought refuge with my own messmates. Then we divided the plug.

We chewed until the tobacco would no longer hold together in our mouths, and then carefully removing the "remains," we laid them tenderly on chips to dry in the sun for future reference. But not for one instant did we dare take our eyes from the "cuds," for even a second-hand "chaw" was a tempting morsel, and had we relaxed our vigilance for a moment some covetous fellow prisoner would have relieved us of our treasure.

There was a little drummer boy in our tent, a frail, delicate little fellow, whose wan and pitiful appearance seemed to soften the hearts of our custodians, and the little fellow was allowed some privileges that were denied to the rest of us. Just outside of the guardrail, and near the middle of the island, was our cookhouse, and near by was the storehouse for bread. The latter had a slat bottom and was set upon posts about two feet high; the crumbs and scales from the loaves sifted through to the ground. The officer in charge would sometimes allow this little drummer boy to go over to the bread house and gather up the crumbs. He had no basket, or other vessel to carry them in, so he would pull his shirt up above the waistband of his trousers and stuff the "slack" full of crumbs, and then come over to our tent and empty them on the ground so that we could all feast upon them. This little fellow—I have forgotten his name—was very cute, and when the officer was not looking he would reach up and gouge a large piece out of a loaf and hurriedly hide it in among the crumbs. Living upon crumbs has been considered very light diet ever since the days of Lazarus, but I can distinctly remember the time when a shirt full of crumbs looked as tempting to me as a ten-course dinner would now-a-days.

Sometimes men who were crazed by fever and suffering would attempt to escape. One of the men of my regiment, Robert Love, of Company G, was one of these. He made a desperate rush and succeeded in passing both lines of guards, and threw himself into the James, striking out for the opposite shore. Of course the alarm was given at once, and in a few minutes the shore was lined with guards, each shooting at the bold man who was

swimming across the stream. There must have been at least a hundred guards, each one firing as fast as he could load, but strange to say, not a shot reached the mark. By the time poor Love, thoroughly exhausted, reached the opposite shore, there were plenty of "rebs" there to meet him. The poor fellow was brought back, put in irons, and died shortly afterward.

During McClellan's retreat from the Peninsula he left thousands of small arms of all kinds on the battlefield. These were gathered up and many of them were sent over to Belle Isle with a view to having them cleaned and scoured up by the Union prisoners. The authorities offered an extra loaf of bread each day to any prisoner who would engage in this work. This was a great temptation, under the circumstances, but so far as I know only one yielded to the seductive offer, and he only worked one day. As soon as he came into camp that night one side of his head was shaved and he was given a sound thrashing by his disgusted comrades.

One of the "characters" on the island was "Abe" Tice, of my company. Abe was one of the stalwart kind, and a better soldier never shouldered a musket. But he didn't like the "Johnnies" for a cent. One day he and I had been out to the sink, and when returning, about halfway between the sink and the guardrail, we encountered a little, dried up specimen of a rebel soldier. Abe stopped short, looked around at the fellow for a few seconds, and then, in a tone of infinite contempt and disgust, exclaimed:

"Are *you* one of those blasted pusillanimous little whipper-snappers that claimed you could whip any six Yankees?"

Notwithstanding, the fellow was on his own ground and clothed with authority, he was actually frightened, and hardly knew what to say.

Finally he managed to reply:

"I reckon I is, sah."

"You *is*, is you? Why, blast your little insignificant soul, if they will turn me loose among fifty such as you, I will whip the whole business, single-handed, and never get out of my tracks!" shouted Abe, while the little soldier turned white with fear and rage.

It was lucky for Abe that the fellow was off duty and unarmed, or he would have certainly got a bullet through him for his impudence. As it was we got into camp without any trouble, and never heard anything more about the circumstance.

The death roll was something fearful. Almost every morning there would be four or five poor fellows found dead in their holes or tents. Just as soon as a death was made known there would be a grand rush over to the guard rail in front of the commander's quarters, and a hundred or more men would be begging for the privilege of going out to help bury the corpse; for, on such occasions, each man detailed for that duty received an extra ration of bread.