

## An Incident of the Civil War

Being an Abbreviated Account of "The Life of an Army Paymaster for a Day" taken from *The Light and Dark of the Rebellion*, Published by George W. Childs, Philadelphia, 1863.

Major J. Ledyard Hodge, "one of the most accomplished paymasters of the army," furnished this account to the anonymous author of the volume in which it appears. He says, "The entire authenticity of the record is certain, and the raciness of the recital will speak for itself."

Early in the autumn of 1861, I was directed to pay a regiment of volunteers near Washington. The payment was to be made immediately; and the sum of \$75,000 was handed to me at the same time as the order. It was then in the days when "greenbacks" were unknown, and the money I received was good, solid gold and silver, fresh from the Mint.

Being at that time a paymaster of about three weeks' standing, and as unaccustomed to the possession of \$75,000 as a midshipman to the society of admirals, I felt no small responsibility for the safe custody of the treasure, and considerable anxiety as to the proper disbursement of the money, to be correct in my payments to the soldiers and watchful for the security of my bondsmen.

Deliver me from ever again making the first payment to a volunteer regiment just raised, and not at all disciplined! I would rather, at any time, take four which had been paid two or three times, and to whom there was only the regular even two months' pay coming—where every man knows exactly what he is entitled to, and steps up in his turn and rakes off the table his twenty-six dollars with the satisfaction of one who feels he has fairly earned it.

Fortunately for me, I was at that time in comparative ignorance of what was to happen to me. I knew I had my rolls very incompletely made up, but the regiment must be paid at once; it might move any hour, and the orders were imperative.

Trusting to luck, and unbounded certifying and affidavits, to cover up all defects, both of the rolls and the payments thereon, I started on a bright Wednesday morning for the camp of the regiment. A four-horse ambulance, furnished by the quartermaster, contained "Caesar and his fortunes," which consisted of the specie-chest and contents, an overcoat, a revolver, and a haversack with cooked rations for two days, and "whiskey for five."

The escort was composed of my clerk and the driver,—not as powerful a guard as the two gunboats and regiment of infantry that escorted a party of paymasters up the Tennessee River to protect them from any polite attentions on the part of John Morgan, but sufficient, as I *then* thought, for all the dangers I was likely to meet. I changed my mind before I got back.

It was in the beginning of September 1861, when the confused mass of men driven back to Arlington Heights from the defeat of Bull Run was just beginning, under the organization of General McClellan, to bud out into the afterwards celebrated "Army of the Potomac,"—at the time when the rebels held Miner's and Munson's Hills, and their flag could be seen from the top of the Capitol, while their pickets scoured the country within four miles of Washington.

A few nights before, a brigade of troops had been marched over the Chain Bridge to protect its farther end, and were then engaged in building the two forts <sup>1</sup> that cover the approaches by the Leesburg turnpike. It was one of these regiments that I was sent to pay.

We went along beautifully by the river road, and laughed at the enemy's cavalry and guerillas, till we reached the bridge. There on the hill frowned a heavy battery behind an earthwork. <sup>2</sup> At the end of the bridge two brass howitzers <sup>3</sup> promised a full allowance of grape and canister to all unauthorized travellers while the flooring of the bridge itself taken up for several yards would have made it very inconvenient for cavalry to charge over on a gallop.

While the flooring was being relaid, I inquired the reason of this extra precaution, with a brigade on the other side guarding the approaches, and was comforted by the reply that the rebel cavalry thought nothing of cutting in behind our men and picking up stragglers and plunder close down on the river, and that the night before they had appeared about half a mile above on the opposite bank and fired at our pickets.

The brigade was about two miles out on the other side, and could be reached only by a road cut through the woods by the troops, and barely wide enough for a wagon.

Pleasant prospect, I thought; but it was broad daylight, and there was plenty of company,—commissary-wagons with provisions, stragglers hunting for their regiments, officers who had been in town on leave and without it, sutlers' wagons, and country-people.

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<sup>1</sup>Fort Marcy and Fort Ethan Allen.

<sup>2</sup>Btry. Martin Scott. (2 James 6 Pdrs.)

<sup>3</sup>Chain Bridge Btry. (2 Mt. How. 12 Pdr.)

As soon as the bridge was made passable, we all poured over. Everything went on as straight as could be: we didn't lose the road but once, and then found ourselves in the camp of a New York regiment, who were intensely disgusted when they found a paymaster had strayed in among them by mistake, with no intention of favoring them. We nearly upset half a dozen times (which is nothing uncommon in roads only three days old, with all the stumps of the trees yet standing), and were detained half an hour while our team, added to the six horses of a Parrott gun, hauled the gun and its limber out of the creek, where it had stalled in fording. But in due course of time we reached the camp.

I drove directly to the colonel's quarters, had a tent pitched alongside as an office, borrowed the necessary camp tables and chairs, gave out the company rolls to be receipted, and invited the field and staff officers in the meantime to step up and be paid.

When these few payments were made, the company rolls not being yet signed, there succeeded an interval which could only be properly filled by all hands then present, the chaplain included, taking a drink,—first with the colonel in honor of my arrival, and next with me, that I might soon call again.

I, of course, made due inquiries as to the military situation, and found that we held, or were considered to hold, a very strong position on the hill where we were then standing, with a beautiful line of retreat over this interesting road I had just traversed, and secure communications, especially at night, with our base of operations the other side of the Potomac, by means of the unfloored Chain Bridge. Our outside pickets were about a mile out to the front, and beyond them the enemy were reported in strong force at Dranesville, about five miles off, and their pickets and mounted patrols came down every night and rode along within a hundred yards of our sentries, who had orders not to fire on them, as we were by no means anxious to bring on a skirmish, even, till the two forts were completed.

I paid out money steadily all that afternoon till after sundown, and by that time had completed everything, except two companies on picket, who would not be relieved till the next morning, and one other company whose muster-rolls were so hopelessly incorrect and imperfect that there was no remedy but to make them out entirely fresh. The captain of the company accordingly went to work, while I, at the invitation of the field-officer of the day, who was a major of the regiment I was paying, rode out to accompany him in his rounds of the pickets.

We went about a mile, and then rode along our line. They were stationed in the edge of a wood, with open fields in front, and about a hundred yards from a country road, over which the enemy's mounted patrols deliberately

trotted every night. Our boys thought it very hard they couldn't take a resting shot now and then, on bright moonlight nights, at those impudent vedettes; but the orders were imperative: so they watched them pass by in silence.

At the time we visited the picket-line, however, it was all quiet enough; not a sign of an enemy to be seen, unless it were two or three thin columns of smoke going straight up in the motionless air and apparently about a mile off. The pickets said they were from the camp-fires of one of the rebel outposts. I took their word for it,—didn't think there was any use of making a personal examination: so we rode back to camp.

Soon after our return, supper was announced, and I joined a mess of some six officers at the usual bill of fare of an officers' mess,—cold meat, hot coffee, crackers, and a bottle of whiskey. Everyone was in high spirits: the war had just opened; no one thought of the terrible losses ahead; and the scenery, the bright moonlight night, the breathing of the fresh pure air, the songs of the soldiers in the adjoining camp;—everything went to make a cheerful, pleasant hour. In less than forty-eight hours the brightest of that party lay dead in that very tent, killed in a picket-skirmish; and the swamps of Chickahominy and the fields of Gaines' Mill and Antietam have left but two more of the six who laughed and chatted around that camp-table.

After supper we strolled up to the unfinished fort, and from its parapets, with a full moon in a cloudless sky, we saw as beautiful a panorama as any lover of nature could desire. Away off beyond us could be tracked the course of the river, its stream looking like silver in the light; below a line of camp-fires traced the encampments of the Union troops down along the heights in front of Washington, till lost in the distance; and in front a solitary sparkle in the whole expanse of country seen from that elevation told of the danger and enemy to be looked for out of that darkness and uncertainty.

My hotel was my ambulance. I had my clerk alongside, the specie-box underneath, and a sentry at each end of the wagon: so I felt pretty secure, and slept "like a top." We were all quiet, when the clear ring of a musket-shot sounded as it were close at hand. It is wonderful how sound is heard of a clear, calm night. That shot was from a sentry a mile off. The rebel patrols, as usual, were taking their nightly rounds down the road. The moon brought them out sharp and clear against the background of trees behind them. The men of the scout were hardened by past immunity, and they rode along laughing and joking.

Just as they came to the turn of the road where it led away from our line, one of them, in reply to a remark from a comrade, said, "D——n the Yankees! Who cares for them?" It was too much for our sentry, who from the edge of the woods on our side had been watching them. A sharp report, the singing of a Minie bullet, and one of the horsemen reeled in his saddle,

was caught by his friends, and the party dashed off; while the word of alarm passed down the line of our pickets for miles, and the guards turned out with full expectation of seeing a rebel column, only to swear at the unlucky sentry and wish him in the guardhouse, where he found himself early next morning as a reward for shooting a rebel contrary to orders.

We were out early enough next morning, and at work making up the defective company's new rolls. I had finished that job when an orderly came up at full speed.

"Where's Colonel . . . . ?" He was standing in the tent at the time.

"Here is a note from General . . . , sir. I was told to deliver it as quickly as possible."

The note was short and simple. It read as follows:

"The enemy are said to be advancing from Dranesville. Move with your regiment out to the turnpike, and await orders there. Immediate."

The next minute the long roll was beat, and everything changed as by magic. I turned round a minute to gather up papers and money and tumble them indiscriminately into the box. By the time I had finished, the companies were forming. The men rushed in from the trenches of the fort in their shirt-sleeves, caught their muskets from the stack and took their places, without waiting for coat, blanket, or haversack.

They cheered and shouted and danced. One would have thought they were going to a frolic.

Ten months afterwards I saw that same regiment (what was left of it) fall in on the morning of the battle of Malvern Hills. There was no cheering, no dancing, no laughing. The men's faces were set and solemn; they looked round carefully to see that nothing was left, that their blankets were well slung, their canteens full, their cartridge-boxes handy. Those men who danced and cheered would probably have run away had they met an enemy that day. *At Malvern Hills they fought like devils.*

In ten minutes the regiment was off. I offered my services as an aid to the colonel, borrowed a horse, and started, leaving my box in charge of my clerk and the camp-guard, knowing it was useless to try and get it back over the river then.

We went over the same route I had come out,—down the hill over the branch, up through the long cut and newly-made road on the other side (how I blessed that cut that evening!), and out to the turnpike. Here an order was received to move out the pike to support the troops who had gone ahead of us; and, looking back, we could see a long line of troops coming up by the river road on the other side, while the occasional flash of a brass gun in the sunlight told of howitzers and Napoleon guns in plentiful supply.

Everyone expected there would be a fight, of course. Troops were moving; orderlies were rushing round, hunting up the persons for whom they had despatches; aides-de-camp, and spare officers generally, rode by, looking as important and solemn as if General McClellan had just sent for each of them personally to obtain their views and advice.

In the meantime the regiment had halted, and the men, somewhat fatigued by their rapid march, did not seem so enthusiastic as at first. Those who had left their coats behind complained of being chilly; and all regretted their haversacks.

Suddenly a rumor ran down the line that it was all a hoax; that a company of rebel cavalry had scared one of our patrols, who had rushed in and reported all Johnston's army advancing; that our cavalry had been out to Dranesville, and reported nothing there but some violent secesh women and *pigs*, the latter of which they took possession of, not thinking the former worth the trouble.

Sure enough, in a few minutes the order came to return to camp. I have heard of that celebrated army that swore terribly in Flanders. If it beat the portion of the army of the Potomac that was out on this excursion, it was a remarkable body of men. Such an outpouring of oaths, such a variety of expression, all centered on one object,—the man or men who gave the alarm,—was never before heard. He was the best cursed man in the country.

I was not in a saintlike frame of mind myself. I had two companies to pay; it was after three o'clock, considerably; the road and woods would be full of stragglers from the different regiments who had been out that day; there was a gradual clouding over of the sky, and the moon would not rise till after nine. Altogether, I did not admire my ride home that night at all.

However, I hurried through my payments, made short work of the various complainants and questioners who at the end of the paying off of a regiment always come up with their special cases for explanation and settlement, hardly waited to say good-bye to or take a farewell drink with the officers who treated me so kindly, and by five o'clock I was rattling down the hill, with as firm a determination of being within the corporate limits of the city of Georgetown before dark as a man could well have.

Down we went to the branch, and through it, and had just started up the cut that led up the hill on the other side, when I saw at the farther end, on the top of the hill, the white top of an army-wagon thrown out in relief against the already fast-darkening sky.

"Hold on, driver: two wagons can't pass in this road. We must haul to one side and wait till that fellow gets by."

So we pulled out and waited. Down came the wagon with wheels locked and teamster swearing as usual; but after it came another, and another, and another; and so the line kept on, till upwards of forty had passed. It was a commissary train, with a supply of rations for the whole brigade. For over one hour did that train keep us waiting at the foot of that cut. Job himself would have lost patience; as for me, I was so mad I couldn't even swear. However, it passed at last.

But now it was dark, and we had to go over this wild road cut through the woods. Every man we met would know the ambulance, and what it contained, and I pretty much considered my throat as cut already.

Innocent people may wonder what I was afraid of, so far within the lines of our own army, and within a mile of camps where whole brigades of men were posted. Not of the rebels, surely? No, indeed; I felt safe enough on that point. But there was a certain class of people, called *stragglers and camp-followers*, with respect to whose company on a dark night and in a lonely place we may well use the petition of the Litany, and exclaim, "Good Lord, deliver us." They would think no more of robbery and murder than of eating their dinner; and a paymaster with a chest of money was a chance not to be neglected.

I took the seat alongside the driver, with a revolver in my hand, put my clerk behind to protect the rear, made a mental promise to shoot the first man that touched the horses' heads, and told the driver to "make time."

How I watched as we went up that hill! Every stump of a tree was a man crouching by the road; every cricket that chirruped was the cocking of a musket; every bush that rustled was a person moving in the undergrowth. Twice we met a couple of soldiers going to camp, and each time I expected to see the horses' heads seized, and was surprised when they passed by as a matter of course.

Didn't I feel relieved when we came out of that dark, uncertain road onto the turnpike? and wasn't a load lifted off my breast when I answered the challenge of the sentry at the head of the Chain Bridge, showed my pass, crossed the bridge, and felt the ambulance rattling along at a fast trot over the river road to Georgetown? I slept well that night. And so ended my first trip as a paymaster.