

CHAPTER XVIII

Yankee Prisons

In June or July of the same year (1865) I received from my friend Captain Williams of Greeneville, Tennessee a note written on the Columbia and Charlotte cars that he had the day before met our son Colonel F. A. Ramsey returning from his imprisonment at Camp Morton, Indiana, and had told him where he would find us. A very few days afterwards he called at Dr. Henderson's and I went with him to Mr. Cannon's. We had not heard from him in several months and from what we had seen of the cruelties and inhumanity of the Federal prisons and especially of their treatment of Confederate prisoners at Camp Morton we were not without apprehensions that we would never see his face again. He told me that the reality exceeded the worst accounts we had seen of the rapacity, the injustice, the extortion, frauds, oppression, tyranny, cruelty, inhumanity and massacres at Camp Morton. His recital of these is undoubtedly truthful and reliable. He saw all the above catalogue displayed daily and there can be no mistake about it. It is all true. I enumerate only a few and these not the blackest of Federal *crimes* perpetrated by Yankee soldiers acting as they said under orders of superior officers bearing commissions in the United States army. When captured at Piedmont, Alexander was refused the privilege of remaining with and nursing his little brother Arthur whose leg was shattered and nearly cut off by a cannon ball (the wounded boy was left on the field and the foot was not amputated for four or five days—thus inducing tetanus of which he died as already stated). He with the other captured soldiers were then hurried off on foot, not withstanding the fatigue of the preceding marches and countermarches several days before the fight. The enemy were the conquerors and in *undisputed* possession of the whole country near them. Yet as if required by the exigencies of war or the least dread of pursuit or recapture the *officers* on horseback hurried up the men, with their drawn swords, and compelled their prisoners to a double quick over mountains and through water courses more than waist deep so rapid as to require that several prisoners

should walk abreast to support one another from being overwhelmed by the impetuous stream. Some of the weaker and shortest men thus sunk beneath the water and, if rescued at all, were left on the shore. This flight—for it was a disgraceful *flight* (there were no Confederates to make pursuit)—was continued day and night, without intermission and with no halt only to eat scanty rations, till the prisoners arrived at _____ wearied, sleepy and hungry. Arrived at Camp Morton, what little money prisoners had was taken from their pockets. In that abundant country their provisions were stinted and unpalatable. Their comfort was never consulted. Their guards were insolent, cruel and revengeful. A letter arrived from his mother to Alexander inclosing, as the letter stated, \$5.00. The letter was opened, the money taken out, and he never got it. Friends at Knoxville had written to Reverend McIntyre, once of that place, requesting his good offices in behalf of the Tennessee prisoners. That good man, once our frequent guest, was not permitted to see these objects of his Christian commiseration and sympathy. But anxious to serve them he addressed a note to Alexander and inquired what he needed? He replied clothes. A suit was sent to him. He was tantalized by the sight of the clothes, but they were withheld. Another application made some months later for a blanket was more successful. In many ways Mr. McIntyre tried to mitigate the sufferings and promote the comfort of the Knoxville prisoners but his kind efforts were thwarted.

Prison Life in Morton

When the soldiers captured at Piedmont arrived at Camp Morton they found many others there taken at other battlefields of the South. Some of these, by longer confinement and ill-usage, already emaciated, despondent—not sick enough yet to be sent into the hospital, but dreading that change of their condition and place of confinement the more from the fact that as yet no one hitherto sent to the hospital had ever come back to their companions. They had invariably died there and found relief from their captivity and sufferings only in the grave. Of these one was Major Corry with whom Alexander and all of us were acquainted. He was a gentleman of science and position—chief engineer on the W. and A. Railroad and had been captured. . . . After their first interview he found some solace from his imprisonment and separation from his wife and family and home in the companionship with Colonel Ramsey and seemed for the time to be trying to bolster himself and his co-prisoners against

the adversities and debility consequent upon imprisonment. They were much together. He lost his appetite. His letters and money were withheld. Alexander tried to comfort him. The weather was exceedingly cold. Alexander lent him his blanket.

The stove was inadequately supplied with fuel. The jailor—I will not designate him as the prison regulations did, the curator—at length issued orders that messes of twelve each should alternately have periods of warming a given number of minutes around the stove. They were then required to give place to the next mess of freezing prisoners, retire to their bunks or cells or cots or berths as the case might be till the whole garrison had got warm and then resume the course again. Coal and other fuel were doled out most economically as if our prisoners, badly clad, some of them without a blanket, in that inclement winter of that cold climate could survive without subsistence and without fire. These deprivations were mentioned to the keeper without success. One replied our prisoners were better treated than those at Andersonville. Soon after this an order was given and carried into effect that rations should be issued in quantity barely sufficient to preserve life. This regimen was rigidly enforced. The stoutest survived this cruel diminution of bread. The weaker sank under it. The first symptom of this decadence was a melancholy, a despondence, a withdrawal from comradeship and a seeking after solitude. The subject of it would withdraw to a corner with a stupid gaze at the floor, a stubborn taciturnity, a perfect apathy and indifference to his surroundings—the extinction of the social principal, the extinguishment of hope. The hospital was next and the grave soon afterward. In the case of Major Corry, when these first symptoms were noticed, Alexander went to him and enticed him from his solitude and tried to recall into life his usual vivacity and to restore his wonted energy. He said he was aware what this languor implied and had been endeavoring all the time to fight against and overcome it. Alexander's continued efforts for a time seemed to reanimate and excite the dormant vitality of Major Corry. At length the curator ordered him to the hospital. Alexander asked permission to go with him. That was refused. He afterwards asked leave to visit. This, too, was refused. He never saw him again.

But this is not all of prison life in Camp Morton. One of the regulations there was that at _____ o'clock lights should be extinguished and the most absolute silence observed. On one occasion noises were heard in one of the rooms, arising, as the inmates conjectured, from the ravings of a maniac,

the delirium of unsound sleep or the dreams of one accustomed to the foray and the battle. Silence was ordered from without. The noise was repeated. A volley from the sentinels killed two innocent men and wounded several others. Many other acts of similar atrocity could be here added. "Even the tender mercies of the wicked are cruelty." One day the keeper brought to a prisoner something palatable from a friend without. The prisoner, when his name was called, came forward. The keeper, in accordance with the Yankee code of ethics to the vanquished, said, "You damned coward and rebel! I ought not to let you have this. Eat it quick and if you open your mouth or say one word this bayonet will send you to Hell and then to Andersonville for your next meal of fire and damnation!" Such spirit and temper were once considered unofficer-like and cowardly. Used by a victor to an imprisoned and vanquished soldier they become contemptible, base, unmanly and little. Andersonville! The slaughter pen at Andersonville! Words often repeated to atone for Federal cruelty and inhumanity to our unfortunate prisoners in their own camps. What of Andersonville? I was never there. But I have seen Yankee prisoners and the wounded of the Yankee army in Georgia and elsewhere. I have dressed their wounds and have had the duty assigned to me to see their prisoners cared for, and I avow the truth when I assert that in not a single case on the cars, in the hospitals, in the prison at Salisbury, or on the march to the rear have I ever seen a cruelty perpetrated, an insult given, or an indignity offered to a captured enemy. I once heard the words *retaliation* and *the black flag* threatened but these words came from the mouth of a *bomb-proof* fireside patriot whose duties as commissary consisted in operating where there was neither danger nor self-denial. Far otherwise. The Confederates were brave in battle, generous in victory, and incapable of what was degrading or humiliating to any enemy disarmed or conquered. This is the pluck, these are the inborn principles of slave institutions and slave territory.

The prisoners were sent from Camp Morton according to alphabetical order and R. being far down in the alphabet Alexander did not leave till near the last. At Nashville he called upon his uncle and, receiving some help, was able to join his family near Yorkville, South Carolina.

In July of 1866 Robert was married in Rowan County. He had previously sold his farm in Tennessee. It had been sold under the existing

laws of that ill-governed state and rather than resort to tedious litigation he sold it below its value. He was thus in funds to take a bridal tour,—his sister Sue accompanying them. At Washington he saw the name of his brother Crozier on the hotel register. They arranged to meet on the same day at Richmond and to return together to our home in Mecklenburg. The bridal party went to Baltimore where they met several Tennessee exiles hunting business. Before their return to North Carolina they visited the disastrous battlefield of Piedmont, spent a night with the Christian family of Mr. Cline where their brother Arthur died. They visited his lonely grave, dropped copious showers of fraternal tears to the young martyr's memory, breathed a heavy sigh of regret when they left it for Richmond. There they met Crozier and together came on to our *Exile's Retreat* near Charlotte, as I had named our new home.

This was a most joyous meeting to all my family, as the reader will suppose when he reads the recital of the sufferings and the wrongs our eldest son, John Crozier Ramsey, endured after we left him at Bristol in October, 1864. The reader will bear in mind what has already been said—that he was paroled at Vicksburg, and was remaining in the rear of the Confederate States army anxiously expecting to be exchanged and to resume his sword. He had lumbago and though still young used a staff when on his feet. He was still in the hospital at Bristol and under treatment of my brother, Dr. F. A. Ramsey, medical purveyor of Tennessee. I had frequently after leaving him (October 1864) warned him of the dangerous proximity of the Federal cavalry and had urged him to come to our retreat in North Carolina and thus avoid the rigorous climate of the mountains and enjoy the milder winter of Mecklenburg. He thought and hoped he would soon be exchanged and preferred therefore to remain near the expected theater of future military service. At Christmas the Federal cavalry made a sudden dash into Bristol at night and captured what few Confederate soldiers were there—with the hospital, its stores, its invalids, its surgeons, and all. At the time of his capture he was in bed and in the same room was a comrade of his, J. A. Sperry, editor of the Knoxville (*Atlanta, Augusta, Columbia, and, I believe, the Charlotte*) *Register*. Sperry noticed first that the town was full of Yankees and communicated his apprehensions to Crozier. He took time by the forelock and before the captors had entered his room he sent across the street by his servant his gold watch and other valuables to a daughter of his uncle to be taken

care of by her. The telegraph announced a great victory and the capture of most important personages.

Soon the prisoners were in motion upon the frozen and muddy roads to Knoxville. Crozier was permitted to ride a horse—so were, too, the army surgeons. The rest had to walk under guards. Crozier, riding near the superior officer, discovered somehow that he was a Mason and, sympathizing with Sperry who was afoot, made known to the officer that the latter was also a Mason and that he was unable to bear the fatigue and cold of his march. True to the obligations of the fraternity of Masons the commander furnished a horse to Sperry. Arrived at Knoxville these two and another prisoner Fox, formerly jailor at Knoxville in Confederate times, were paraded through the streets and marched to the jail and put in close confinement in a large room filled with convicts, felons, deserters from the United States army, men infamous for crime, desperate from their guilt and merited punishment. Intemperance, lawlessness, violence and crime were stamped on every feature of these desperadoes, thieves and murderers. Such were the inmates of this horrid prison. It was during the Christmas holidays. Bottles, jugs, canteens full of whisky, packages of cards, an old fiddle, etc., completed the outfit of the establishment with outbursts of profanity, ribaldry, and blasphemy on every tongue. Such were the surroundings of General J. C. Ramsey and J. A. Sperry when introduced by Federal authority to their prison house at Knoxville. The streets were in accordance with the prison. There was a general jubilee, a noisy rabble, an infuriated mob.

There is an instinctive deference to character and virtue which even bandits are not unwilling to pay. After the two Confederate prisoners were inaugurated into their new lodgings a comparative silence and quiet were restored. The drunken and outrageous became more calm. Crozier was interrogated by a dozen of clients as to the chances of each to escape punishment. He had in ante-bellum days become famous as a criminal lawyer. He found one there in jail for a repetition of the same offense of which he had been before acquitted. This one renewed his clientship and became the earnest patron of his old advocate and solicitor and advised all who wished to escape the halter to employ his old lawyer and friend. With all this patronage of the entire prison no fees were paid, I believe, though much was promised if they could be *clared*. Sperry, too, the editor was much interrogated about the news. Will the Rebels gain the day?

"Yes," said Sperry, "if they are not all killed, whipped, captured or imprisoned like we are. Very few are left and these few are scattered everywhere." At length all fell asleep. One of Crozier's clients lay so closely to him as to abstract from him a beautiful delicate pin made up of gold and diamonds. To this article of dress the owner always attached a special and peculiar value (hereto hangs a tale), but he never recovered it. Another trespass was committed the same night. His lady friends had sent to him an excellent luncheon and so abundant that he left much of it for morning use, concealing it as he lay upon the floor in a large pocket of his overcoat. It somehow disappeared and no questions were asked about the larceny.

Next morning the prisoners in the jail were, as usual, balled and chained and led along the principal streets to work upon the fortifications around town. Crozier's chain fortunately was so long as to allow him to carry the ball united to it in his hands and thus to let him walk erect. Sperry's, on the other hand, was so short as to shorten his steps and materially retard his movements. When they arrived at the fortifications it became evident even to the most obdurate and revengeful of the guards that Crozier was yet so much of an invalid and physically unable to work with a spade as to remit him from that duty. In the afternoon the line of march was resumed and the prisoners reconducted to their prison. This, like the morning display, was made for the purpose of gratifying the fiendish—not to say the infernal—malignity of two or three (perhaps not so many) ignoble and revengeful partizans in Knoxville. Along the pavements stood the virtue, intelligence and respectability of both town and country and of both sexes. They bowed a friendly recognition of the new and stranger *convict* as he trudged through the muddy street. Chained and balled as he was he acknowledged and reciprocated these recognitions from those who knew his worth and appreciated his high character by a graceful bow and a pleasant smile. He was amiable and he was popular and as he passed along not a jaunt, nor a jeer, not a word of reproach nor of unkindness was uttered in his hearing. The low and little means adopted and intended to humiliate and mortify his proud spirit had just the opposite effect both upon himself and the masses by which he was surrounded. A howl of indignant public sentiment could not be suppressed and spreading along the streets reached headquarters. An official order from the chief in command released the invalid prisoner and sent him to the hospital. By whose authority and at whose request this great in-

dignity and wrong had been perpetrated remains unknown. General —, the chief in command disavowed and revoked the order of some subordinate in Knoxville.

The enormity of this outrage against law, justice, decency, and honor will be the more clearly manifested when it is remembered that General Ramsey, the subject of it, had at the surrender of Vicksburg been paroled, had not been exchanged, was still not only an invalid but was captured while under treatment for a chronic lumbago and rheumatism first induced by service and exposure in the trenches at Vicksburg—that by the usages of honorable warfare the hospital of an enemy is sacred and the person of an invalid prisoner should not be exposed to inclement weather and the discomfort and suffering on the march—that imprisonment was unnecessary and especially amongst felons and outlaws—that the ball and chain were only cruel appendages to an unmerciful and unlawful punishment inflicted not by regular military authority but by an usurped and irresponsible power and that the march to and from the fortifications was only the exercise of a despotism as remorseless as it was dishonorable and unnecessary. This whole transaction from Bristol to Knoxville rests, will forever rest, as a stain upon the honor of the United States army and will forever tarnish the reputation and blight the fame and disgrace the epaulettes of any officer who inflicted the cruelty or even connived at or permitted the violation of the rules of legitimate and civilized war. General Jackson or General Scott would have cashiered such an officer as one every way unworthy of association with gentlemen of honor and true courage.

In the hospital General Ramsey received the kindnesses, civilities and consideration due to a gentleman situated as he was. Ladies of the first character visited him and contributed in many ways to his comfort and his loneliness. Mrs. Dickson, his only sister near him, asked admittance to his room. The keeper at first refused, saying so many called to see him that his door was always open and his room got cold. She replied that she had brought him a nice luncheon from the country. He replied "To my certain knowledge, he has had twenty-seven luncheons that day already." But learning that Mrs. Dickson was his sister, the door was cheerfully opened to her and admittance was never afterwards refused. At this first interview Crozier asked his sister to contrive word to us in North Carolina that he was very comfortable and feared no further molestation. He always showed himself the dutiful and affectionate son, more solicitous

to allay our anxiety for him and to quiet our apprehensions for his health and his life than for his own safety and escape. All his subsequent letters are full of this filial spirit. He even contrived by verbal messages through union and secession friends who called to see him, to appease the uneasiness of his mother and me. Many of these reached us before and after the surrender. Well may his parents be proud of such a son. Well may the Confederacy boast of a patriot so true, so loyal, so brave, so honorable! He made many remarkable escapes during the war and after it. The evening after his parade through the streets, as already said, he was sent to the hospital and Sperry to a separate prison. This was not generally known. The populace believed they were both still in jail. Sometime during the night a mob obtained entrance and took out one of the prisoners and hung him. I have been told that the mob asked for Ramsey and Sperry. The tragic murder of poor Baker would have been the fate of the other two if they had been in the prison. Crozier had held civil office under Mr. Buchanan. He resigned it when Tennessee seceded and accepted both military and civil appointments under the Confederacy.¹ This constituted treason and a writ was issued and he arrested for that offense. He was also arrested and tried for murder under the false charge that he had been a member of a Confederate States court martial which had condemned some offenders to be hung. By the testimony of a leading Union man, a member of the Knoxville bar, it was proved that Crozier was not on the Confederate States court martial and, of course, he was acquitted. Other frivolous charges were stumped up for the occasion. When they came up for trial he was acquitted of them all. But during their pendency his life was in danger and threats of assassination were constantly made. Under these circumstances his friends of both parties advised him to withdraw from Knoxville until

“The fierce storm be overblown
“And its avenging fury cease.”

He desired trial. He demanded it. He feared no verdict against him:

¹ John Crozier Ramsey had been appointed Confederate States District Attorney for the East Tennessee District. He held no commission in the Confederate army. His title of “General,” which Dr. Ramsey always used, derived, after the Tennessee custom, from his having been “attorney-general” of Knox County before the war.

“Colonel” Francis Alexander Ramsey, too, seems to have served as an enlisted man, as his imprisonment in Camp Morton, almost completely reserved for enlisted personnel, would indicate. His title came, as Dr. Ramsey explained earlier, from his having been elected colonel of a militia regiment in ante-bellum days. Dr. Ramsey never conferred a military title on his son McKnitt, while Robert, who had been commissioned a lieutenant in the Confederate navy, served as a “captain” of a partisan company of scouts.

he had committed no offense. He, therefore, at first refused to accede to the advice of his friends to go away even for a time. One of his old clients told him at last that if he employed him again as he preferred to do his barns would be burned and his cause but prejudiced and jeopardized, and he, too, advised him to leave Knoxville. Crozier therefore reluctantly withdrew to Nashville and opened a law office there. Soon after this another writ was sued against him and but for the intercession of the excellent Mrs. J. K. Polk with General George H. Thomas my son would have been sent to a Northern prison. Such was the unrelenting spirit of persecution excited by two or three men against an innocent and inoffensive Confederate prisoner. But persisting in the determination already made and publicly expressed, Crozier wrote to me that he would face the music and yet demand a trial. He did so. On his acquittal he was invited by a friend to tea. The league, as they called themselves, heard of it and again threatened assassination. But the incorruptible Judge Conally F. Trigg had two of the parties arrested and bound in a large sum to keep the peace with J. C. Ramsey and all other persons.

This pleasant interview with our son continued several days. At the end of it he declared himself better rested, more recruited than he had been since the war. Postal communication was now (1866) fully established and hereafter his own letters to us will exhibit his great filial and fraternal regard and devotion to our family and their interests as well as his own affairs. . . . His sister Mrs. Breck returned with him to Knoxville. Her plantation had been despoiled by the invaders and was yet in the possession of others. It was therefore thought necessary for her to visit Knoxville. A *feme covert* was once considered incapable of the commission of treason—but new lords, new laws is now the order of the day. Mrs. Breck had refused to renounce her allegiance to the South and she must become the victim of Federal rapacity, aggression and wrong. After heavy costs and long delay and losses she was repossessed of her real estate though not of her back rents. Peculation committed by an individual makes him infamous. When perpetrated by the government it is no crime, but is justified by modern jurists as a public necessity and a fit chastisement of rebel women and it only whets the appetite for more plunder and greater injustice.