November 27, 1862.

Thanksgiving-Day: it is the first moment I have had for writing during these three days, which have installed me into a new mode of life so thoroughly that they seem three years. Scarcely pausing in New York or in Beaufort, there seems to have been for me but one step from the camp of a Massachusetts regiment to this, and that step over leagues of waves.[i]

It is a holiday wherever General Saxton’s proclamation[ii] reaches. The chilly sunshine and the pale blue river seems like New England, but those alone. The air is full of noisy drumming, and of gunshots; for the prize-shooting is our great celebration of the day, and the drumming is chronic. My young barbarians are all at play. I look out from the broken windows of this forlorn plantation-house, through avenues of great live-oaks, with their hard, shining leaves, and their branches hung with a universal drapery of soft, long moss, like fringe-trees struck with grayness. Below, the sandy soil, scantly covered with coarse grass, bristles with sharp palmettoes and aloes; all the vegetation is stiff, shining, semi-tropical, with nothing soft or delicate in its texture. Numerous plantation-buildings totter around, all slovenly and unattractive, while the interspaces are filled with all manner of wreck and refuse, pigs, fowls, dogs, and omnipresent Ethiopian[iii] infancy. All this is the universal Southern panorama; but five minutes’ walk beyond the hovels and the live-oaks will bring one to something so un-Southern that the whole Southern coast at this moment trembles at the suggestion of such a thing,—the camp of a regiment of freed slaves.

One adapts one’s self so readily to new surroundings that already the full zest of the novelty seems passing away from my perceptions, and I write these lines in an eager effort to retain all I can. Already I am growing used to the experience, at first so novel, of living among five hundred men, and scarce a white face to be seen,—of seeing them go through all their daily processes, eating, frolicking, talking, just as if they were white. Each day at dress-parade I stand with the customary folding of the arms before a regimental line of countenances so black that I can hardly tell whether the men stand steadily or not; black is every hand which moves in ready cadence as I vociferate, “Battalion! Shoulder arms!” nor is it till the line of white officers moves forward, as parade is dismissed, that I am reminded that my own face is not the color of coal.

The first few days on duty with a new regiment must be devoted almost wholly to tightening reins; in this process one deals chiefly with the officers, and I have as yet had but little personal intercourse with the men. They concern me chiefly in bulk, as so many consumers of rations, wearers of uniforms, bearers of muskets. But as the machine comes into shape, I am beginning to decipher the individual parts. At first, of course, they all looked just alike; the variety comes

---

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Camp Diary,” from *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1869)

afterwards, and they are just as distinguishable, the officers say, as so many whites. Most of them are wholly raw, but there are many who have already been for months in camp in the abortive “Hunter Regiment,” yet in that loose kind of way which, like average militia training, is a doubtful advantage. I notice that some companies, too, look darker than others, though all are purer African than I expected. This is said to be partly a geographical difference between the South Carolina and Florida men. When the Rebels evacuated this region they probably took with them the house-servants, including most of the mixed blood, so that the residuum seems very black. But the men brought from Fernandina the other day average lighter in complexion, and look more intelligent, and they certainly take wonderfully to the drill.

It needs but a few days to show the absurdity of distrusting the military availability of these people. They have quite as much average comprehension as whites of the need of the thing, as much courage (I doubt not), as much previous knowledge of the gun, and, above all, a readiness of ear and of imitation, which, for purposes of drill, counterbalances any defect of mental training. To learn the drill, one does not want a set of college professors; one wants a squad of eager, active, pliant school-boys; and the more childlike these pupils are the better. There is no trouble about the drill; they will surpass whites in that. As to camp-life, they have little to sacrifice; they are better fed, housed, and clothed than ever in their lives before, and they appear to have few inconvenient vices. They are simple, docile, and affectionate almost to the point of absurdity. The same men who stood fire in open field with perfect coolness, on the late expedition, have come to me blubbering in the most irresistibly ludicrous manner on being transferred from one company in the regiment to another.

In noticing the squad-drills I perceive that the men learn less laboriously than whites that “double, double, toil and trouble,” which is the elementary vexation of the drill-master,—that they more rarely mistake their left for their right,—and are more grave and sedate while under instruction. The extremes of jollity and sobriety, being greater with them, are less liable to be intermingled; these companies can be driven with a looser rein than my former one, for they restrain themselves; but the moment they are dismissed from drill every tongue is relaxed and every ivory tooth visible. This morning I wandered about where the different companies were target-shooting, and their glee was contagious. Such exulting shouts of “Ki! ole man,” when some steady old turkey-shooter brought his gun down for an instant’s aim, and then unerringly hit the mark; and then, when some unwary youth fired his piece into the ground at half-cock such guffawing and delight, such rolling over and over on the grass, such dances of ecstasy, as made the “Ethiopian minstrelsy” of the stage appear a feeble imitation.

Evening.—Better still was a scene on which I stumbled to-night. Strolling in the cool moonlight, I was attracted by a brilliant light beneath the trees, and cautiously approached it. A circle of thirty or forty soldiers sat around a roaring fire, while one old uncle, Cato by name, was narrating an interminable tale, to the insatiable delight of his audience. I came up into the dusky background, perceived only by a few, and he still continued. It was a narrative, dramatized to the last degree, of his adventures in escaping from his master to the Union vessels; and even I, who have heard the stories of Harriet Tubman, and such wonderful slave-comedians, never witnessed such a piece of acting. When I came upon the scene he had just come unexpectedly upon a plantation-house, and, putting a bold face upon it, had walked up to the door.
“Den I go up to de white man, berry humble, and say, would he please gib ole man a mouthful for eat?

“He say he must hab de valeration ob half a dollar.

“Den I look berry sorry, and turn for go away.

“Den he say I might gib him dat hatchet I had.

“Den I say” (this in a tragic vein) “dat I must hab dat hatchet for defend myself from de dogs!”

(Immense applause, and one appreciating auditor says, chuckling, “Dat was your arms, ole man,” which brings down the house again.)

“Den he say de Yankee pickets was near by, and I must be very keerful.

“Den I say, ‘Good Lord, Mas’r, am dey?’”

Words cannot express the complete dissimulation with which these accents of terror were uttered,—this being precisely the piece of information he wished to obtain.

Then he narrated his devices to get into the house at night and obtain some food,—how a dog flew at him, how the whole household, black and white, rose in pursuit,—how he scrambled under a hedge and over a high fence, etc.,,—all in a style of which Gough[vi] alone among orators can give the faintest impression, so thoroughly dramatized was every syllable.

Then he described his reaching the river-side at last, and trying to decide whether certain vessels held friends or foes.

“Den I see guns on board, and sure sartin he Union boat, and I pop my head up. Den I been-a-tink (think) Seceshkey [sic] hab guns too, and my head go down again. Den I hide in de bush till morning. Den I open my bundle, and take ole white shirt and tie him on ole pole and wave him, and evry time de wind blow, I been-a-tremble, and drap down in de bushes,”—because, being between two fires, he doubted whether friend or foe would see his signal first. And so on, with a succession of tricks beyond Molière, of acts of caution, foresight, patient cunning, which were listened to with infinite gusto and perfect comprehension by every listener.

And all this to a bivouac of negro soldiers, with the brilliant fire lighting up their red trousers and gleaming from their shining black faces,—eyes and teeth all white with tumultuous glee. Overhead, the mighty limbs of a great live-oak, with the weird moss swaying in the smoke, and the high moon gleaming faintly through.

Yet to-morrow strangers will remark on the hopeless, impenetrable stupidity in the daylight faces of many of these very men, the solid mask under which Nature has concealed all this wealth of mother-wit. This very comedian is one to whom one might point, as he hoed lazily in a cotton-field, as a being the light of whose brain had utterly gone out; and this scene seems like coming
by night upon some conclave of black beetles, and finding them engaged, with green-room and foot-lights, in enacting "Poor Pillicoddy." This is their university; every young Sambo before me, as he turned over the sweet potatoes and peanuts which were roasting in the ashes, listened with reverence to the wiles of the ancient Ulysses, and meditated the same. It is Nature’s compensation; oppression simply crushes the upper faculties of the head, and crowds every-thing into the perceptive organs. Cato, thou reasonest well! When I get into any serious scrape, in an enemy’s country, may I be lucky enough to have you at my elbow, to pull me out of it!

The men seem to have enjoyed the novel event of Thanksgiving-Day; they have had company and regimental prize-shootings, a minimum of speeches and a maximum of dinner. Bill of fare: two beef-cattle and a thousand oranges. The oranges cost a cent apiece, and the cattle were Secesh, bestowed by General Saxby, as they all call him.

December 1, 1862.
How absurd is the impression bequeathed by Slavery in regard to these Southern blacks, that they are sluggish and inefficient in labor! Last night, after a hard day’s work (our guns and the remainder of our tents being just issued), an order came from Beaufort that we should be ready in the evening to unload a steamboat’s cargo of boards, being some of those captured by them a few weeks since, and now assigned for their use. I wondered if the men would grumble at the night-work; but the steamboat arrived by seven, and it was bright moonlight when they went at it. Never have I beheld such a jolly scene of labor. Tugging these wet and heavy boards over a bridge of boats ashore, then across the slimy beach at low tide, then up a steep bank, and all in one great uproar of merriment for two hours. Running most of the time, chattering all the time, snatching the boards from each other’s backs as if they were some coveted treasure, getting up eager rivalries between different companies, pouring great choruses of ridicule on the heads of all shirkers, they made the whole scene so enlivening that I gladly stayed out in the moonlight for the whole time to watch it. And all this without any urging or any promised reward, but simply as the most natural way of doing the thing. The steamboat captain declared that they unloaded the ten thousand feet of boards quicker than any white gang could have done it; and they felt it so little, that, when, later in the night, I reproached one whom I found sitting by a campfire, cooking a surreptitious opossum, telling him that he ought to be asleep after such a job of work, he answered, with the broadest grin,—

“O no, Cunnel, da’s no work at all, Cunnel; dat only jess enough for stretch we.”

December 2, 1862.
I believe I have not yet enumerated the probable drawbacks to the success of this regiment, if any. We are exposed to no direct annoyance from the white regiments, being out of their way; and we have as yet no discomforts or privations which we do not share with them. I do not as yet see the slightest obstacle, in the nature of the blacks, to making them good soldiers, but rather the contrary. They take readily to drill, and do not object to discipline; they are not especially dull or inattentive; they seem fully to understand the importance of the contest, and of their share in it. They show no jealousy or suspicion towards their officers.

They do show these feelings, however, towards the Government itself; and no one can wonder. Here lies the drawback to rapid recruiting. Were this a wholly new regiment, it would have been
full to overflowing, I am satisfied, ere now. The trouble is in the legacy of bitter distrust bequeathed by the abortive regiment of General Hunter,—into which they were driven like cattle, kept for several months in camp, and then turned off without a shilling, by order of the War Department. The formation of that regiment was, on the whole, a great injury to this one; and the men who came from it, though the best soldiers we have in other respects, are the least sanguine and cheerful; while those who now refuse to enlist have a great influence in deterring others. Our soldiers are constantly twitted by their families and friends with their prospect of risking their lives in the service, and being paid nothing; and it is in vain that we read them the instructions of the Secretary of War to General Saxton, promising them the full pay of soldiers. They only half believe it.[1]

Another drawback is that some of the white soldiers delight in frightening the women on the plantations with doleful tales of plans for putting us in the front rank in all battles, and such silly talk,—the object being perhaps, to prevent our being employed on active service at all. All these considerations they feel precisely as white men would,—no less, no more; and it is the comparative freedom from such unfavorable influences which makes the Florida men seem more bold and manly, as they undoubtedly do. To-day General Saxton has returned from Fernandina with seventy-six recruits, and the eagerness of the captains to secure them was a sight to see. Yet they cannot deny that some of the very best men in the regiment are South Carolinians.

December 3, 1862.—7 P.M.
What a life is this I lead! It is a dark, mild, drizzling evening, and as the foggy air breeds sand-flies, so it calls out melodies and strange antics from this mysterious race of grown-up children with whom my lot is cast. All over the camp the lights glimmer in the tents, and as I sit at my desk in the open doorway, there come mingled sounds of stir and glee. Boys laugh and shout,—a feeble flute stirs somewhere in some tent, not an officer’s,—a drum throbs far away in another,—wild kildeer-plover flit and wail above us, like the haunting souls of dead slave-masters,—and from a neighboring cook-fire comes the monotonous sound of that strange festival, half pow-wow, half prayer-meeting, which they know only as a “shout.” These fires are usually enclosed in a little booth, made neatly of palm-leaves and covered in at top, a regular native African hut, in short, such as is pictured in books, and such as I once got up from dried palm-leaves for a fair at home. This hut is now crammed with men, singing at the top of their voices, in one of their quaint, monotonous, endless, negro-Methodist chants, with obscure syllables recurring constantly, and slight variations interwoven, all accompanied with a regular drumming of the feet and clapping of the hands, like castanets. Then the excitement spreads: inside and outside the enclosure men begin to quiver and dance, others join, a circle forms, winding monotonously round some one in the centre; some “heel and toe” tumultuously, others merely tremble and stagger on, others stoop and rise, others whirl, others caper sideways, all keep steadily circling like dervishes; spectators applaud special strokes of skill; my approach only enlivens the scene; the circle enlarges, louder grows the singing, rousing shouts of encouragement come in, half bacchanalian, half devout, “Wake ’em, brudder!” “Stan’ up to ’em, brudder!”—and still the ceaseless drumming and clapping, in perfect cadence, goes steadily on. Suddenly there comes a sort of snap, and the spell breaks, amid general sighing and laughter. And this not rarely and occasionally, but night after night, while in other parts of the camp the soberest prayers and exhortations are proceeding sedately.
A simple and lovable people, whose graces seem to come by nature, and whose vices by training. Some of the best superintendents confirm the first tales of innocence, and Dr. Zachos[viii] told me last night that on his plantation, a sequestered one, “they had absolutely no vices.” Nor have these men of mine yet shown any worth mentioning; since I took command I have heard of no man intoxicated, and there has been but one small quarrel. I suppose that scarcely a white regiment in the army shows so little swearing. Take the “Progressive Friends”[ix] and put them in red trousers, and I verily believe they would fill a guard-house sooner than these men. If camp regulations are violated, it seems to be usually through heedlessness. They love passionately three things besides their spiritual incantations; namely, sugar, home, and tobacco. This last affection brings tears to their eyes, almost, when they speak of their urgent need of pay; they speak of their last-remembered quid as if it were some deceased relative, too early lost, and to be mourned forever. As for sugar, no white man can drink coffee after they have sweetened it to their liking.

I see that the pride which military life creates may cause the plantation trickeries to diminish. For instance, these men make the most admirable sentinels. It is far harder to pass the camp lines at night than in the camp from which I came; and I have seen none of that disposition to connive at the offences of members of one’s own company which is so troublesome among white soldiers. Nor are they lazy, either about work or drill; in all respects they seem better material for soldiers than I had dared to hope.

There is one company in particular, all Florida men, which I certainly think the finest-looking company I ever saw, white or black; they range admirably in size, have remarkable erectness and ease of carriage, and really march splendidly. Not a visitor but notices them; yet they have been under drill only a fortnight, and a part only two days. They have all been slaves, and very few are even mulattoes.

December 4, 1862.
“Dwelling in tents, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”[x] This condition is certainly mine,—and with a multitude of patriarchs beside, not to mention Caesar and Pompey, Hercules and Bacchus.

A moving life, tented at night, this experience has been mine in civil society, if society be civil before the luxurious forest fires of Maine and the Adirondack, or upon the lonely prairies of Kansas. But a stationary tent life, deliberately going to housekeeping under canvas, I have never had before, though in our barrack life at “Camp Wool”[xi] I often wished for it.

The accommodations here are about as liberal as my quarters there, two wall-tents being placed end to end, for office and bedroom, and separated at will by a “fly” of canvas. There is a good board floor and mop-board, effectually excluding dampness and draughts, and everything but sand, which on windy days penetrates everywhere. The office furniture consists of a good desk or secretary, a very clumsy and disastrous settee, and a remarkable chair. The desk is a bequest of the slaveholders, and the settee of the slaves, being ecclesiastical in its origin, and appertaining to the little old church or “praise-house,” now used for commissary purposes. The chair is a composite structure: I found a cane seat on a dust-heap, which a black sergeant combined with two legs from a broken bedstead and two more from an oak-bough. I sit on it with a pride of conscious invention, mitigated by profound insecurity. Bedroom furniture, a
couch made of gun-boxes covered with condemned blankets, another settee, two pails, a tin cup, tin basin (we prize any tin or wooden ware as savages prize iron), and a valise, regulation size. Seriously considered, nothing more appears needful, unless ambition might crave another chair for company, and, perhaps, something for a wash-stand higher than a settee.

To-day it rains hard, and the wind quivers through the closed canvas, and makes one feel at sea. All the talk of the camp outside is fused into a cheerful and indistinguishable murmur, pierced through at every moment by the wail of the hovering plover. Sometimes a face, black or white, peers through the entrance with some message. Since the light readily penetrates, though the rain cannot, the tent conveys a feeling of charmed security, as if an invisible boundary checked the pattering drops and held the moaning wind. The front tent I share, as yet, with my adjutant; in the inner apartment I reign supreme, bounded in a nutshell, with no bad dreams.

In all pleasant weather the outer “fly” is open, and men pass and repass, a chattering throng. I think of Emerson’s Saadi,[xii] “As thou sittest at thy door, on the desert’s yellow floor,”—for these bare sand-plains, gray above, are always yellow when upturned, and there seems a tinge of Orientalism in all our life.

Thrice a day we go to the plantation-houses for our meals, camp-arrangements being yet very imperfect. The officers board in different messes, the adjutant and I still clinging to the household of William Washington,—William the quiet and the courteous, the pattern of house-servants, William the noiseless, the observing, the discriminating, who knows everything that can be got, and how to cook it. William and his tidy, lady-like little spouse Hetty—a pair of wedded lovers, if ever I saw one—set our table in their one room, half-way between an unglazed window and a large wood-fire, such as is often welcome. Thanks to the adjutant, we are provided with the social magnificence of napkins; while (lest pride take too high a flight) our table-cloth consists of two “New York Tribunes” and a “Leslie’s Pictorial.”[xiii] Every steamer brings us a clean table-cloth. Here are we forever supplied with pork and oysters and sweet potatoes and rice and hominy and corn-bread and milk; also mysterious griddle-cakes of corn and pumpkin; also preserves made of pumpkin-chips, and other fanciful productions of Ethiop art. Mr. E.[xiv] promised the plantation-superintendents who should come down here “all the luxuries of home,” and we certainly have much apparent, if little real variety. Once William produced with some palpitation something fricasseed, which he boldly termed chicken; it was very small, and seemed in some undeveloped condition of ante-natal toughness. After the meal he frankly avowed it for a squirrel.

**December 5, 1862.**

Give these people their tongues, their feet, and their leisure, and they are happy. At every twilight the air is full of singing, talking, and clapping of hands in unison. One of their favorite songs is full of plaintive cadences; it is not, I think, a Methodist tune, and I wonder where they obtained a chant of such beauty.

“I can’t stay behind, my Lord, I can’t stay behind!
O, my father is gone, my father is gone,
My father is gone into heaven, my Lord!
I can’t stay behind!”
Dere’s room enough, room enough,
Room enough in de heaven for de sojer:
Can’t stay behind!”

It always excites them to have us looking on, yet they sing these songs at all times and seasons. I have heard this very song dimly droning on near midnight, and, tracing it into the recesses of a cook-house, have found an old fellow coiled away among the pots and provisions, chanting away with his “Can’t stay behind, sinner,” till I made him leave his song behind.

This evening, after working themselves up to the highest pitch, a party suddenly rushed off, got a barrel, and mounted some man upon it, who said, “Gib anoder song, boys, and I’se gib you a speech.” After some hesitation and sundry shouts of “Rise de sing, somebody,” and “Stan’ up for Jesus, brudder,” irreverently put in by the juveniles, they got upon the John Brown song, always a favorite, adding a jubilant verse which I had never before heard,—“We’ll beat Beauregard on de clare battlefield.” Then came the promised speech, and then no less than seven other speeches by as many men, on a variety of barrels, each orator being affectionately tugged to the pedestal and set on end by his special constituency. Every speech was good, without exception; with the queerest oddities of phrase and pronunciation, there was an invariable enthusiasm, a pungency of statement, and an understanding of the points at issue, which made them all rather thrilling. Those long-winded slaves in “Among the Pines” seemed rather fictitious and literary in comparison. The most eloquent, perhaps, was Corporal Price Lambkin, just arrived from Fernandina, who evidently had a previous reputation among them. His historical references were very interesting. He reminded them that he had predicted this war ever since Fremont’s time, to which some of the crowd assented; he gave a very intelligent account of that Presidential campaign, and then described most impressively the secret anxiety of the slaves in Florida to know all about President Lincoln’s election, and told how they all refused to work on the fourth of March, expecting their freedom to date from that day. He finally brought out one of the few really impressive appeals for the American flag that I have ever heard. “Our mas’rs dey hab lib under de flag, dey got dere wealth under it, and ebryting beautiful for dere chilen. Under it dey hab grind us up, and put us in dere pocket for money. But de fus’ minute dey tink dat ole flag mean freedom for we colored people, dey pull it right down, and run up de rag ob dere own.” (Immense applause). “But we’ll neber desert de ole flag, boys, neber; we hab lib under it for eighteen hundred sixty-two years, and we’ll die for it now.” With which overpowering discharge of chronology-at-long-range, this most effective of stump-speeches closed. I see already with relief that there will be small demand in this regiment for harangues from the officers; give the men an empty barrel for a stump, and they will do their own exhortation.

December 11, 1862.

Haroun Alraschid, wandering in disguise through his imperial streets, scarcely happened upon a greater variety of groups than I, in my evening strolls among our own camp-fires.

Beside some of these fires the men are cleaning their guns or rehearsing their drill,—beside others, smoking in silence their very scanty supply of the beloved tobacco,—beside others, telling stories and shouting with laughter over the broadest mimicry, in which they excel, and in which the officers come in for a full share. The everlasting “shout” is always within hearing,
with its mixture of piety and polka, and its castanet-like clapping of the hands. Then there are quieter prayer-meetings, with pious invocations and slow psalms, “deaconed out” from memory by the leader, two lines at a time, in a sort of wailing chant. Elsewhere, there are conversazioni around fires, with a woman for queen of the circle,—her Nubian face, gay headdress, gilt necklace, and white teeth, all resplendent in the glowing light. Sometimes the woman is spelling slow monosyllables out of a primer, a feat which always commands all ears,—they rightly recognizing a mighty spell, equal to the overthrowing of monarchs, in the magic assonance of cat, hat, pat, bat, and the rest of it. Elsewhere, it is some solitary old cook, some aged Uncle Tiff, with enormous spectacles, who is perusing a hymn-book by the light of a pine splinter, in his deserted cooking booth of palmetto leaves. By another fire there is an actual dance, red-legged soldiers doing right-and-left, and “now-lead-de-lady-ober,” to the music of a violin which is rather artistically played, and which may have guided the steps, in other days, of Barnwells and Hugers. And yonder is a stump-orator perched on his barrel, pouring out his exhortations to fidelity in war and in religion. To-night for the first time I have heard a harangue in a different strain, quite saucy, sceptical, and defiant, appealing to them in a sort of French materialistic style, and claiming some personal experience of warfare. “You don’t know notin’ about it, boys. You tink you’s brave enough; how you tink, if you stan’ clar in de open field,—here you, and dar de Secesh? You’s got to hab de right ting inside o’ you. You must hab it ‘served (preserved) in you, like dese yer sour plums dey ‘serve in de barr’l; you’s got to harden it down inside o’ you, or it’s notin.” Then he hit hard at the religionists: “When a man’s got de sperit ob de Lord in him, it weakens him all out, can’t hoe de corn.” He had a great deal of broad sense in his speech; but presently some others began praying vociferously close by, as if to drown this free-thinker, when at last he exclaimed, “I mean to fight de war through, an’ die a good sojer wid de last kick,—dat’s my prayer!” and suddenly jumped off the barrel. I was quite interested at discovering this reverse side of the temperament, the devotional side preponderates so enormously, and the greatest scamps kneel and groan in their prayer-meetings with such entire zest. It shows that there is some individuality developed among them, and that they will not become too exclusively pietistic.

Their love of the spelling-book is perfectly inexhaustible,—they stumbling on by themselves, or the blind leading the blind, with the same pathetic patience which they carry into everything. The chaplain is getting up a schoolhouse, where he will soon teach them as regularly as he can. But the alphabet must always be a very incidental business in a camp.

January 1, 1863 (evening). A happy New Year to civilized people,—mere white folks. Our festival has come and gone, with perfect success, and our good General has been altogether satisfied. Last night the great fires were kept smouldering in the pit, and the beeves were cooked more or less, chiefly more,—during which time they had to be carefully watched, and the great spits turned by main force. Happy were the merry fellows who were permitted to sit up all night, and watch the glimmering flames that threw a thousand fantastic shadows among the great gnarled oaks. And such a chattering as I was sure to hear whenever I awoke that night!

My first greeting to-day was from one of the most stylish sergeants, who approached me with the following little speech, evidently the result of some elaboration:
“I tink myself happy, dis New Year’s Day, for salute my own Cunnel. Dis day las’ year I was servant to a Cunnel ob Secesh; but now I hab de privilege for salute my own Cunnel.”

That officer, with the utmost sincerity, reciprocated the sentiment.

About ten o’clock the people began to collect by land, and also by water,—in steamers sent by General Saxton for the purpose; and from that time all the avenues of approach were thronged. The multitude were chiefly colored women, with gay handkerchiefs on their heads, and a sprinkling of men, with that peculiarly respectable look which these people always have on Sundays and holidays. There were many white visitors also,—ladies on horseback and in carriages, superintendents and teachers, officers, and cavalry-men. Our companies were marched to the neighborhood of the platform, and allowed to sit or stand, as at the Sunday services; the platform was occupied by ladies and dignitaries, and by the band of the Eighth Maine, which kindly volunteered for the occasion; the colored people filled up all the vacant openings in the beautiful grove around, and there was a cordon of mounted visitors beyond. Above, the great live-oak branches and their trailing moss; beyond the people, a glimpse of the blue river.

The services began at half past eleven o’clock, with prayer by our chaplain, Mr. Fowler,[xxi] who is always, on such occasions, simple, reverential, and impressive. Then the President’s Proclamation was read by Dr. W. H. Brisbane,[xxii] a thing infinitely appropriate, a South Carolinian addressing South Carolinians; for he was reared among these very islands, and here long since emancipated his own slaves. Then the colors were presented to us by the Rev. Mr. French,[xxiii] a chaplain who brought them from the donors in New York. All this was according to the programme. Then followed an incident so simple, so touching, so utterly unexpected and startling, that I can scarcely believe it on recalling, though it gave the keynote to the whole day. The very moment the speaker had ceased, and just as I took and waved the flag, which now for the first time meant anything to these poor people, there suddenly arose, close beside the platform, a strong male voice (but rather cracked and elderly), into which two women’s voices instantly blended, singing, as if by an impulse that could no more be repressed than the morning note of the song-sparrow.

“My Country, ’tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing!”

People looked at each other, and then at us on the platform, to see whence came this interruption, not set down in the bills. Firmly and irrepressibly the quavering voices sang on, verse after verse; others of the colored people joined in; some whites on the platform began, but I motioned them to silence. I never saw anything so electric; it made all other words cheap; it seemed the choked voice of a race at last unloosed. Nothing could be more wonderfully unconscious; art could not have dreamed of a tribute to the day of jubilee that should be so affecting; history will not believe it; and when I came to speak of it, after it was ended, tears were everywhere. If you could have heard how quaint and innocent it was! Old Tiff and his children might have sung it; and close before me was a little slave-boy, almost white, who seemed to belong to the party, and even he must join in. Just think of it!—the first day they had ever had a country, the first flag they had ever seen which promised anything to their people, and here, while mere spectators
stood in silence, waiting for my stupid words, these simple souls burst out in their lay, as if they were by their own hearths at home! When they stopped, there was nothing to do for it but to speak, and I went on; but the life of the whole day was in those unknown people’s song.

Receiving the flags, I gave them into the hands of two fine-looking men, jet black, as color-guard, and they also spoke, and very effectively,—Sergeant Prince Rivers and Corporal Robert Sutton.[xxv] The regiment sang “Marching Along,” and then General Saxton spoke, in his own simple, manly way, and Mrs. Francis D. Gage[xxvi] spoke very sensibly to the women, and Judge Stickney, from Florida, added something; then some gentleman sang an ode, and the regiment the John Brown song, and then they went to their beef and molasses. Everything was very orderly, and they seemed to have a very gay time. Most of the visitors had far to go, and so dispersed before dress-parade, though the band stayed to enliven it. In the evening we had letters from home, and General Saxton had a reception at his house, from which I excused myself; and so ended one of the most enthusiastic and happy gatherings I ever knew. The day was perfect, and there was nothing but success.

I forgot to say, that, in the midst of the services, it was announced that General Fremont was appointed Commander-in-Chief,—an announcement which was received with immense cheering, as would have been almost anything else, I verily believe, at that moment of high tide. It was shouted across by the pickets above,—a way in which we often receive news, but not always trustworthy.

January 12.
Many things glide by without time to narrate them. On Saturday we had a mail with the President’s Second Message of Emancipation, and the next day it was read to the men. The words themselves did not stir them very much, because they have been often told that they were free, especially on New Year’s Day, and, being unversed in politics, they do not understand, as well as we do, the importance of each additional guaranty. But the chaplain spoke to them afterwards very effectively, as usual; and then I proposed to them to hold up their hands and pledge themselves to be faithful to those still in bondage. They entered heartily into this, and the scene was quite impressive, beneath the great oak-branches. I heard afterwards that only one man refused to raise his hand, saying bluntly that his wife was out of slavery with him, and he did not care to fight. The other soldiers of his company were very indignant, and shoved him about among them while marching back to their quarters, calling him “Coward.” I was glad of their exhibition of feeling, though it is very possible that the one who had thus the moral courage to stand alone among his comrades might be more reliable, on a pinch, than some who yielded a more ready assent. But the whole response, on their part, was very hearty, and will be a good thing to which to hold them hereafter, at any time of discouragement or demoralization,—which was my chief reason for proposing it. With their simple natures it is a great thing to tie them to some definite committal; they never forget a marked occurrence, and never seem disposed to evade a pledge.

It is this capacity of honor and fidelity which gives me such entire faith in them as soldiers. Without it all their religious demonstration would be mere sentimentality. For instance, every one who visits the camp is struck with their bearing as sentinels. They exhibit, in this capacity, not an upstart conceit, but a steady, conscientious devotion to duty. They would stop their
idolized General Saxton, if he attempted to cross their beat contrary to orders: I have seen them. No feeble or incompetent race could do this. The officers tell many amusing instances of this fidelity, but I think mine the best.

It was very dark the other night,—an unusual thing here,—and the rain fell in torrents; so I put on my India-rubber suit, and went the rounds of the sentinels, incognito, to test them. I can only say that I shall never try such an experiment again and have cautioned my officers against it. ‘Tis a wonder I escaped with life and limb,—such a charging of bayonets and clicking of gun-locks. Sometimes I tempted them by refusing to give any countersign, but offering them a piece of tobacco, which they could not accept without allowing me nearer than the prescribed bayonet’s distance. Tobacco is more than gold to them, and it was touching to watch the struggle in their minds; but they always did their duty at last, and I never could persuade them. One man, as if wishing to crush all his inward vacillation at one fell stroke, told me stoutly that he never used tobacco, though I found next day that he loved it as much as any one of them. It seemed wrong thus to tamper with their fidelity; yet it was a vital matter to me to know how far it could be trusted, out of my sight. It was so intensely dark that not more than one or two knew me, even after I had talked with the very next sentinel, especially as they had never seen me in India-rubber clothing, and I can always disguise my voice. It was easy to distinguish those who did make the discovery; they were always conscious and simpering when their turn came; while the others were stout and irreverent till I revealed myself, and then rather cowed and anxious, fearing to have offended.

It rained harder and harder, and when I had nearly made the rounds I had had enough of it, and, simply giving the countersign to the challenging sentinel, undertook to pass within the lines.

“Halt!” exclaimed this dusky man and brother, bringing down his bayonet, “de countersign not correck.”

Now the magic word, in this case, was “Vicksburg,” in honor of a rumored victory. But as I knew that these hard names became quite transformed upon their lips, “Carthage” being familiarized into Cartridge, and “Concord” into Corncob, how could I possibly tell what shade of pronunciation my friend might prefer for this particular proper name?

“Vicksburg,” I repeated, blandly, but authoritatively, endeavoring, as zealously as one of Christy’s Minstrels, to assimilate my speech to any supposed predilection of the Ethiop vocal organs.

“Halt dar! Countersign not correck,” was the only answer.

The bayonet still maintained a position which, in a military point of view, was impressive.

I tried persuasion, orthography, threats, tobacco, all in vain. I could not pass in. Of course my pride was up; for was I to defer to an untutored African on a point of pronunciation? Classic shades of Harvard, forbid! Affecting scornful indifference, I tried to edge away, proposing to myself to enter the camp at some other point, where my elocution would be better appreciated. Not a step could I stir.
“Halt!” shouted my gentleman again, still holding me at his bayonet’s point, and I wincing and halting.

I explained to him the extreme absurdity of this proceeding, called his attention to the state of the weather, which, indeed, spoke for itself so loudly that we could hardly hear each other speak, and requested permission to withdraw. The bayonet, with mute eloquence, refused the application.

There flashed into my mind, with more enjoyment in the retrospect than I had experienced at the time, an adventure on a lecturing tour in other years, when I had spent an hour in trying to scramble into a country tavern, after bed-time, on the coldest night of winter. On that occasion I ultimately found myself stuck midway in the window, with my head in a temperature of 80°, and my heels in a temperature of -10°, with a heavy windowsash pinioning the small of my back. However, I had got safe out of that dilemma, and it was time to put an end to this one.

“Call the corporal of the guard,” said I at last, with dignity, unwilling to make a night of it or to yield my incognito.

“Corporal ob de guard!” he shouted, lustily,—“Post Number Two!” while I could hear another sentinel chuckling with laughter. This last was a special guard, placed over a tent, with a prisoner in charge. Presently he broke silence.

“Who am dat?” he asked, in a stage whisper. “Am he a buckra (white man)?”

“Dunno whether he been a buckra or not,” responded, doggedly, my Cerberus in uniform; “but I’s bound to keep him here till de corporal ob de guard come.”

Yet, when that dignitary arrived, and I revealed myself, poor Number Two appeared utterly transfixed with terror, and seemed to look for nothing less than immediate execution. Of course I praised his fidelity, and the next day complimented him before the guard, and mentioned him to his captain; and the whole affair was very good for them all. Hereafter, if Satan himself should approach them in darkness and storm, they will take him for “de Cunnel,” and treat him with special severity.

January 13.
In many ways the childish nature of this people shows itself. I have just had to make a change of officers in a company which has constantly complained, and with good reason, of neglect and improper treatment. Two excellent officers have been assigned to them; and yet they sent a deputation to me in the evening, in a state of utter wretchedness. “We’s bery grieved dis evening, Cunnel; ’pears like we couldn’t bear it, to lose de Cap’n and de Lieutenant, all two togeder.” Argument was useless; and I could only fall back on the general theory, that I knew what was best for them, which had much more effect; and I also could cite the instance of another company, which had been much improved by a new captain, as they readily admitted. So with the promise that the new officers should not be “savage to we,” which was the one thing they deprecated, I assuaged their woes. Twenty-four hours have passed, and I hear them singing most merrily all down that company street.
I often notice how their griefs may be dispelled, like those of children, merely by permission to utter them: if they can tell their sorrows, they go away happy, even without asking to have anything done about them. I observe also a peculiar dislike of all intermediate control: they always wish to pass by the company officer, and deal with me personally for everything. General Saxton notices the same thing with the people on the plantations as regards himself. I suppose this proceeds partly from the old habit of appealing to the master against the overseer. Kind words would cost the master nothing, and he could easily put off any non-fulfilment upon the overseer. Moreover, the negroes have acquired such constitutional distrust of white people, that it is perhaps as much as they can do to trust more than one person at a time. Meanwhile this constant personal intercourse is out of the question in a well-ordered regiment; and the remedy for it is to introduce by degrees more and more of system, so that their immediate officers will become all-sufficient for the daily routine.

It is perfectly true (as I find everybody takes for granted) that the first essential for an officer of colored troops is to gain their confidence. But it is equally true, though many persons do not appreciate it, that the admirable methods and proprieties of the regular army are equally available for all troops, and that the sublimest philanthropist, if he does not appreciate this, is unfit to command them.

Another childlike attribute in these men, which is less agreeable, is a sort of blunt insensibility to giving physical pain. If they are cruel to animals, for instance, it always reminds me of children pulling off flies’ legs, in a sort of pitiless, untaught, experimental way. Yet I should not fear any wanton outrage from them. After all their wrongs, they are not really revengeful; and I would far rather enter a captured city with them than with white troops, for they would be more subordinate. But for mere physical suffering they would have no fine sympathies. The cruel things they have seen and undergone have helped to blunt them; and if I ordered them to put to death a dozen prisoners, I think they would do it without remonstrance.

Yet their religious spirit grows more beautiful to me in living longer with them; it is certainly far more so than at first, when it seemed rather a matter of phrase and habit. It influences them both on the negative and the positive side. That is, it cultivates the feminine virtues first,—makes them patient, meek, resigned. This is very evident in the hospital; there is nothing of the restless, defiant habit of white invalids. Perhaps, if they had more of this, they would resist disease better. Imbued from childhood with the habit of submission, drinking in through every pore that other-world trust which is the one spirit of their songs, they can endure everything. This I expected; but I am relieved to find that their religion strengthens them on the positive side also, gives zeal, energy, daring. They could easily be made fanatics, if I chose; but I do not choose. Their whole mood is essentially Mohammedan, perhaps, in its strength and its weakness; and I feel the same degree of sympathy that I should if I had a Turkish command,—that is, a sort of sympathetic admiration, not tending towards agreement, but towards cooperation. Their philosophizing is often the highest form of mysticism; and our dear surgeon declares that they are all natural transcendentalists. The white camps seem rough and secular, after this; and I hear our men talk about “a religious army,” “a Gospel army,” in their prayer-meetings. They are certainly evangelizing the chaplain, who was rather a heretic at the beginning; at least, this is his own admission. We have recruits on their way from St. Augustine, where the negroes are chiefly
Roman Catholics; and it will be interesting to see how their type of character combines with that elder creed.

It is time for rest; and I have just looked out into the night, where the eternal stars shut down, in concave protection, over the yet glimmering camp, and Orion hangs above my tent-door, giving to me the sense of strength and assurance which these simple children obtain from their Moses and the Prophets. Yet external Nature does its share in their training; witness that most poetic of all their songs, which always reminds me of the “Lyke-Wake Dirge” in the “Scottish Border Minstrelsy,”[xxviii] —

“I know moon-rise, I know star-rise;  
Lay dis body down.  
I walk in de moonlight, I walk in de starlight,  
To lay dis body down.  
I’ll walk in de graveyard, I’ll walk through de graveyard,  
To lay dis body down.  
I’ll lie in de grave and stretch out my arms;  
Lay dis body down.  
I go to de Judgment in de evening ob de day  
When I lay dis body down;  
And my soul and your soul will meet in de day  
When I lay dis body down.”

January 14.

In speaking of the military qualities of the blacks, I should add, that the only point where I am disappointed is one I have never seen raised by the most incredulous newspaper critics,—namely, their physical condition. To be sure they often look magnificently to my gymnasium-trained eye; and I always like to observe them when bathing,—such splendid muscular development, set off by that smooth coating of adipose tissue which makes them, like the South-Sea Islanders appear even more muscular than they are. Their skins are also of finer grain than those of whites, the surgeons say, and certainly are smoother and far more free from hair. But their weakness is pulmonary; pneumonia and pleurisy are their besetting ailments; they are easily made ill, and easily cured, if promptly treated: childish organizations again.[xxix] Guard-duty injures them more than whites, apparently; and double-quick movements, in choking dust, set them coughing badly. But then it is to be remembered that this is their sickly season, from January to March, and that their healthy season will come in summer, when the whites break down. Still my conviction of the physical superiority of more highly civilized races is strengthened on the whole, not weakened, by observing them. As to availability for military drill and duty in other respects, the only question I ever hear debated among the officers is, whether they are equal or superior to whites. I have never heard it suggested that they were inferior, although I expected frequently to hear such complaints from hasty or unsuccessful officers.

Of one thing I am sure, that their best qualities will be wasted by merely keeping them for garrison duty. They seem peculiarly fitted for offensive operations, and especially for partisan warfare; they have so much dash and such abundant resources, combined with such an Indian-like knowledge of the country and its ways. These traits have been often illustrated in
expeditions sent after deserters. For instance, I despatched one of my best lieutenants and my best sergeant with a squad of men to search a certain plantation, where there were two separate negro villages. They went by night, and the force was divided. The lieutenant took one set of huts, the sergeant the other. Before the lieutenant had reached his first house, every man in the village was in the woods, innocent and guilty alike. But the sergeant’s mode of operation was thus described by a corporal from a white regiment who happened to be in one of the negro houses. He said that not a sound was heard until suddenly a red leg appeared in the open doorway, and a voice outside said, “Rally.” Going to the door, he observed a similar pair of red legs before every hut, and not a person was allowed to go out, until the quarters had been thoroughly searched, and the three deserters found. This was managed by Sergeant Prince Rivers, our color-sergeant, who is provost-sergeant also, and has entire charge of the prisoners and of the daily policing of the camp. He is a man of distinguished appearance, and in old times was the crack coachman of Beaufort, in which capacity he once drove Beauregard from this plantation to Charleston, I believe. They tell me that he was once allowed to present a petition to the Governor of South Carolina in behalf of slaves, for the redress of certain grievances; and that a placard, offering two thousand dollars for his recapture, is still to be seen by the wayside between here and Charleston. He was a sergeant in the old “Hunter Regiment,” and was taken by General Hunter to New York last spring, where the chevrons on his arm brought a mob upon him in Broadway, whom he kept off till the police interfered. There is not a white officer in this regiment who has more administrative ability, or more absolute authority over the men; they do not love him, but his mere presence has controlling power over them. He writes well enough to prepare for me a daily report of his duties in the camp; if his education reached a higher point, I see no reason why he should not command the Army of the Potomac. He is jet-black, or rather, I should say, wine-black; his complexion, like that of others of my darkest men, having a sort of rich, clear depth, without a trace of sootiness, and to my eye very handsome. His features are tolerably regular, and full of command, and his figure superior to that of any of our white officers,—being six feet high, perfectly proportioned, and of apparently inexhaustible strength and activity. His gait is like a panther’s; I never saw such a tread. No anti-slavery novel has described a man of such marked ability. He makes Toussaint[xxx] perfectly intelligible; and if there should ever be a black monarchy in South Carolina, he will be its king.

Notes

i Higginson received a commission to raise the 51st Massachusetts Volunteers in September 1862, but resigned his captainship to lead the First South Carolina Volunteers, the Union Army’s first African American regiment.

ii “Saxton issued a Thanksgiving Proclamation declaring November 27, 1862, to be a general holiday in celebration of military victories and the freedom of slaves in the Port Royal region” (Christopher Looby, The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson [Chicago: University of Chicago Press], p. 46, n. 33).

iii i.e., of African descent.

iv “On their periodic raids along the coast, one of the objectives of the 1st South Carolina was to recruit soldiers from among the slaves and refugees they encountered” (Looby, p. 47, n. 35).

v i.e., blackface minstrelsy.

vi John Bartholomew Gough (1817–1886) was a famous British-born temperance orator.

vii A long-running nineteenth-century theatrical farce.

viii John Celivergos Zachos (1820–1898), assistant surgeon in the Union army.

ix The Progressive Friends were a radical abolitionist Quaker group founded in 1853 in Pennsylvania.
xi Camp Wool was the base of Higginson’s former regiment, the 51st Massachusetts.

xii Emerson’s poem “Saadi” (1847) represents the thirteenth-century Persian poet as oracular and remote, yet compassionate.

xiii First launched in 1855, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper quickly became a highly popular, general interest periodical. During the Civil War, Leslie’s increasingly emphasized visual journalism, employing a team of artists to dramatically illustrate the personalities, scenes, and events of the conflict. In 1861 and 1862, Leslie published four “pictorial” compilations of the newspaper’s war coverage to date.

xiv “George B. Emerson, longtime member of the General Committee of the Educational Commission, sponsors of the Port Royal Experiment” (Looby, p. 61, n. 67).

xv Given the title “Room in There” by Higginson, and the title “I Can’t Stay Behind” by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison in Slave Songs of the United States (New York, 1867).


xvii James R. Gilmore’s abolitionist Among the Pines: or, South in Secession Time (New York, 1862) is a fictionalized account of a tour through the South and includes graphic descriptions of slave life. Gilmore’s African American characters speak in heavy dialect.

xviii Harun Al-Rashid (763–809), the fifth Abassid caliph, oversaw the golden age of Baghdad, inspiring a number of the stories in The Thousand and One Nights. Higginson has apparently taken the spelling from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Recollections of the Arabian Nights” (1830).

xix The Barnwells and Hugers were wealthy planter families in South Carolina.

xx The day the Emancipation Proclamation went into force.

xxi Rev. James H. Fowler was also a volunteer nurse at Judiciary Square Hospital in Washington, D.C.

xxii “Dr. William Henry Brisbane, a native Sea Island planter and convert to abolitionism, he abandoned South Carolina in the 1830s, but returned later after his political awakening to buy back his slaves and convey them to freedom in the North; in 1862 he was appointed as federal tax commissioner in Beaufort, supervising the sale of confiscated Confederate plantations” (Looby, p. 76, n. 96).

xxiii See note viii in the document entitled Susie King Taylor, Reminiscences of My Life in Camp.

xxiv These lyrics were written by Boston native Samuel F. Smith in 1832; the melody, by Siegfried Mahlmann, dates from approximately 1740.

xxv “Corporal, later Sergeant, Prince Rivers, later a member of the South Carolina Constitutional Convention, and a member of the state legislature; Corporal, later Sergeant, Robert Sutton, later court-martialed for an alleged act of mutiny (which, however, TWH and his officers disbelieved), then pardoned and restored to his place in the regiment” (Looby, p. 77, n. 99)

xxvi Frances Dana Gage (1808–1884) was a prominent antislavery and women’s rights activist. She is best known for her written recollections of Sojourner Truth’s address at the 1851 women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio.

xxvii A highly successful, influential blackface minstrelsy troupe from Buffalo, founded by Edwin Pearce Christy in 1843. The group’s heyday ran from 1846 to 1854, during its tenure at Mechanics Hall in New York.

xxviii Higginson is referring to Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border (1802–1803) by the Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832).

xxix Black troops actually suffered a much higher rate of disease than the Union army as a whole, primarily because they disproportionately served in unhealthy climates and received poor medical care.

xxx Toussaint L’Ouverture was a prominent leader of the successful slave revolt on the French island colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791, which set in motion the events leading to Haitian independence in 1804.