
ANONYMOUS
OPIUM EATING:
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
SKETCH BY AN HABITUATE

Anonymous

Opium Eating: An Autobiographical Sketch by an Habituate

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PREFACE.

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The following narration of the personal experiences of the writer is submitted to the reader at the request of numerous friends, who are of opinion that it will be interesting as well as beneficial to the public.

The reader is forewarned that in the perusal of the succeeding pages, he will not find the incomparable music of De Quincey's prose, or the easy-flowing and harmonious graces of his inimitable style, as presented in the "Confessions of an English Opium Eater;" but a dull and trudging narrative of solid facts, disarrayed of all flowers of speech, and delivered by a mind, the faculties of which are bound up and baked hard by the searing properties of opium—a mind without elasticity or fertility—a mind prostrate. The only excuse for writing the book in this mental condition was, and is, that the prospect of ever being able to write under more favorable circumstances appeared too doubtful to rely upon; I felt that I had better now do the best I could, lest my mouth be sealed forever with my message undelivered. The result is before the reader in the following chapters; his charitable judgment of which I have entreated in the body of the work. The introductory part of the book, that relating to my imprisonment, is inserted for my own justification.

THE AUTHOR.

CHAPTER I.

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I Enter the Army.—Taken Prisoner.—Sufferings on the Road to and at Richmond.—Leave Richmond for Danville.—Our Sojourn at the Latter Place.—The Small-pox.—Removal to Andersonville.

In the year 1861, a well and hearty boy of sixteen, I enlisted in the army as a drummer. This was my only possibility of entering the service, as I was too young to be accepted as a private soldier. Though but a drummer, I fought with a gun in all the battles in which our regiment was engaged. It generally so happened that I had no drum about the time of a battle, and being too small to carry off the wounded, and feeling that I was not fulfilling my duty to my country unless I did “the State some service,” I participated in the battle of Stone River, and doing tolerably well there, when the battle of Chickamauga drew nigh, the colonel of our regiment told me, casually, that he would like to see me along; and I did not fail him. He did not command me; he had no authority to do that; it was not necessary; I would have been on hand without his referring to the matter at all, as such was my intention. As it was, I took a sick man’s gun and accoutrements and marched with my company. On the first day of the battle—the 19th of September, 1863—I was captured. Not being wounded, I was taken with about five thousand other prisoners to Richmond, Va., and confined there in the tobacco-factory prisons. On the way to Richmond we had but little to eat, and suffered considerably. At Richmond, our allowance of

food was so small, that during the two and one-half months we were there we became miserably weak, and suffered terribly. It is no doubt a fact, that although hard enough to bear at any time, gradual starvation sets harder upon a man at first than when he has become somewhat accustomed to it. Perhaps this is reasonable enough; the stomach and body being stronger at first, the pangs are more fierce and exhausting.

After being at Richmond three weeks, we could not rise to our feet without crawling up gradually by holding to the wall. Any sudden attempt to rise usually resulted in what is called “blind staggers,”—a fearful, floating, blinding sensation in the head.

Hunger is the most exasperating and maddening of all human suffering, as I do know from most wretched experience. It lengthens out time beyond all calculation, and reduces a man to nothing above a mere savage animal. It makes him a glaring, raging, ferocious brute, and were it not for the accompanying weakness and debility, it would rob him of every instinct of humanity, for the time being. One at length arrives at the conclusion, that all a reasonable being requires in this life, to make him completely happy, is enough to eat. No one that has not experienced it can understand the cruel tedium of hunger, and the eternal war that rages among one’s ferocious inwards, as they struggle to devour and consume themselves; the everlasting gnaw, gnaw, as though one’s stomach were populated with famished rats. It seems that hunger, long continued, sucks all the substance out of the very material of a man’s stomach, and leaves it dry, hard, and serviceless; and also

so contracted in size as not to answer the ends of a stomach at all. In short, constant hunger, continued for an unreasonable length of time, will utterly ruin the stomach.

Although the month was November, I sold my shoes for bread, despite the weather being so cold that I was forced to rise long before daylight in the morning, and find, if possible, some warmer place in the house. We had no stoves; no heat of any kind to keep us warm was supplied by the Confederates, and up to this time no clothing or blankets had been furnished by any one. Soon after this, however,—Providence and the good women of the North be thanked,—the Sanitary Commission of the United States sent us each a suit of clothes and a blanket. Directly after the receipt of the clothing, we were removed to Danville, Va. Here we remained until the following spring.

During the time we were at Danville, we suffered considerably from cold and close confinement. The small-pox also broke out among us, and attacked a great many, but in most cases in a mild form. Those afflicted had it as violently as could be expected under the circumstances, their systems being in such a depleted condition that the disease had nothing to feed on. In fear of it, and to prevent it, many were vaccinated. I was not,—and I thank Providence that I was not, as I knew some to suffer worse from vaccination than they could have done from the small-pox, even though it terminated fatally; for it did terminate fatally in the cases of vaccination, and after more suffering than could possibly have ensued from the dreaded disease itself. The vaccine virus proved to be poisonous in some cases. I knew a man whose left arm was eaten to the bone

by it, the bone being visible, and the cavity, which was circular in shape, was as large in circumference as an ordinary orange. After months of excruciating pain, the man died. But sometimes vaccination did not even prevent the small-pox. A man with whom the writer bunked was vaccinated, and it “took,” what would be considered immensely well, a very large scab developing upon each arm. Yet this man took the small-pox, and badly, while the writer,—to take another view of the case,—although he had not been vaccinated for about thirteen years, and yet had been exposed to the disease in almost every way, and had slept with this man while he was taking it, and after he returned from the small-pox hospital with his sores but partially healed up, remained perfectly free of it.

I thought if I must have it, I must, and there was an end of the matter; there being no way of avoiding it that I could see; and I do not know but the late vaccination, while the disease was already thickly scattered about the house, increased the danger of contagion by throwing the blood into a fever of the same kind; while by leaving the blood undisturbed, if the disease was not intercepted, the chances of taking it were at least not augmented.

We left Danville in April, 1864, having been confined there about five months. Although confined very closely, and our liberties few, upon the whole, Danville was the best-provided prison I was in; the rations of food being larger and more wholesome than at any other prison. It is true that the buckets of pea-soup swam with bugs, but that was a peculiarity of that savory dish at all the prisons of the South. We became accustomed to drinking the soup, bugs and all,

without any compunctions of delicacy about it, and our only and sincere wish was for more of the same kind. Many a time did I pick these bugs from between my teeth without any commotion in my stomach whatever,—save of hunger. A man becomes accustomed to this way of living, and loses all sense of delicacy regarding his food. Quantity is the only question to be considered, quality being an object so unimportant as to be entirely lost sight of.

We arrived at Andersonville, Ga., five days after leaving Danville. We had a very uncomfortable journey, being penned up in freight cars, seventy-five in a car, and not allowed to get out but once during the whole journey. We changed cars once on the route, and this was the only opportunity we had of stretching our limbs during the entire trip.

I now ask the reader to allow me to pause a few moments to take breath and gather strength and courage for the task before me.

CHAPTER II.

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ENTRANCE INTO ANDERSONVILLE PRISON.—HORRIBLE SIGHTS.—THE BELLE ISLANDERS.—THE KIND OF TREATMENT FOR FIRST FEW MONTHS.—CONDITION OF THINGS GENERALLY DURING THAT TIME.—NEW PRISONERS.—INAUGURATION OF CRUEL TREATMENT.—GOING OUT FOR FUEL AND SHELTER PROHIBITED.—RATIONS DIMINISHED.—THE PHILOSOPHY OF SOUTHERN PRISON DISCIPLINE.—SEVERITIES OF CLIMATE AND DREADFUL SUFFERING.

Andersonville! Dread word! Dread name for cruelty, and patriots' graves, I stand paralyzed before thy horrid gates! Thou grim Leviathan of Death! I feel heart-sick as I approach thee! I feel how powerless I am to tell thy horrible story, thou monster monument of Inhumanity in the nation's history! I feel thy fangs while yet I descry thy hideous form through the mazy scope of years! I carry thy stings, and the grave alone shall hide the scars upon the marred and shattered body thou hast sacrificed, as a tree stripped of its fruit and foliage!

After being counted into detachments and nineties by the commandant, the notorious Captain Wirz, we were marched into the prison. Heavens! what a sight met our gaze as we marched into that enclosure of destruction! Lying between the stockade and the dead-line, was a long line of corpses, which was necessarily one of the first objects our eyes rested upon as we entered the prison gates.

There they lay, nearly naked in their rags, but the frames—but the bones and skin of men—with their upturned, wildly-ghastly, staring faces, and wide-open eyes.

This was a terrible greeting indeed; and it sent a feeling of dismay to our very souls, and after that a deep sense of despair seemed to settle upon us. We had at last met death face to face. On looking around, we saw the men whose comrades these dead men had been. They all looked alike, and we could not fail to observe the resemblance between the dead and the living. These men were from Belle Island, a rebel prison, which stands unrivalled in the history of the world for cruelty to human beings. I fervently thank God that it pleased Him that I should not be confined there. These poor, wretched men, who had been there, and who preceded us at Andersonville, were the most ghastly-looking living human beings that the eye of man ever beheld. They were nothing but skin and bone. Living skeletons. In color perfectly black. They had no shelter, and smoked themselves black over their pitch-pine fires. The limited time they survived our arrival they spent in cooking, and sitting haunched up over their little fires. They died so rapidly that, before we were aware of it, not one could be seen in the camp. They became ripe for the stroke of the sickle, all of them about the same time, and their Father gathered them to His abundant harvest.

From the misfortunes of these men we took some consolation, strange as it may appear. When witnessing the terrible mortality among them, we said, “Oh, it is only the Belle Islanders that are dying.”

As soon as we had to some extent shaken off the depressing influence exerted upon us by the knowledge of the horrible condition of the Belle Islanders, we began to encourage ourselves with the idea that our fate would not

be like theirs; that we had not been on Belle Island, nor experienced the terrible sufferings from exposure and starvation which they had been subjected to, and that, therefore, the mortality could not be so great among us as it had been among them. But we reckoned without having the least conception of what possibilities there were in the future. True, we had fared much better than the Belle Island men. We had not been so exposed to the weather, and had not suffered as much from insufficient quantity of food; we had been able to keep ourselves in better sanitary condition. We were much cleaner and better off in every way, to all appearances. But, as I remarked before, we had not the least comprehension of the possibilities of the future. We had no intimation whatever of the monster of destruction that lay sleeping in our systems, and floating torpidly about in our veins. But the awful knowledge was to dawn upon us soon, and unmistakably. Scurvy—a disease so awful and so dread, that its name to a man in such a place was but another name for death—was destined to break out among us. This disease made its appearance three months after our arrival at Andersonville. Up to that time, knowing nothing of this, suspecting nothing of the kind, we enjoyed our lives better than we had any time since our capture.

During the first few months of our sojourn at Andersonville, the Confederates allowed us a sufficient quantity of food to support life. We were also comparatively free and unconfined, were out of doors, had room to walk about, and could see the shady forest. This was a great relaxation from, and improvement upon, hard walls. The rebels also—as they issued us raw rations—allowed us to

get wood to cook with, and for the purpose of making shelter. For a short time, then,—and it was a short time, indeed, compared to the long term of our imprisonment,—we were happier than we had been during all of our previous captivity. But no man was ever happy long in rebel prisons, and the period of our bliss was of but short duration. Not only did men die of the scurvy as fast as the snow melts in spring, but other misfortunes befell us. Or rather, these last came in the shape of Southern barbarities; but although they were barbarities in those who inflicted them, they were serious misfortunes to the Yankee prisoners. It seemed, no sooner had the spring campaigns opened, and men came pouring into the prison as though the Northern army had been captured in full, than the rebel authorities prohibited going out for wood, so that those who came in after that date could not get out for material to make shelter with. Hence, it seemed thereafter a race between the old prisoners and the new to see who would die the soonest; the new prisoners, having no shelter, dying from exposure and other severities, and the old prisoners, having shelter, dying from the scurvy.

Another misfortune to us, and barbarity in the rebels, was a decrease in the quantity of food as our numbers increased. The result of this act of cruelty was, of course, to make all weaker, old and new prisoners irrespectively. But to the new prisoners I have no doubt it came the hardest. Their stomachs were not shrunken, dried, and hardened to starvation as were those of the old prisoners. Their stomachs and systems generally being in better condition, they felt the demand for food more keenly than did the half-