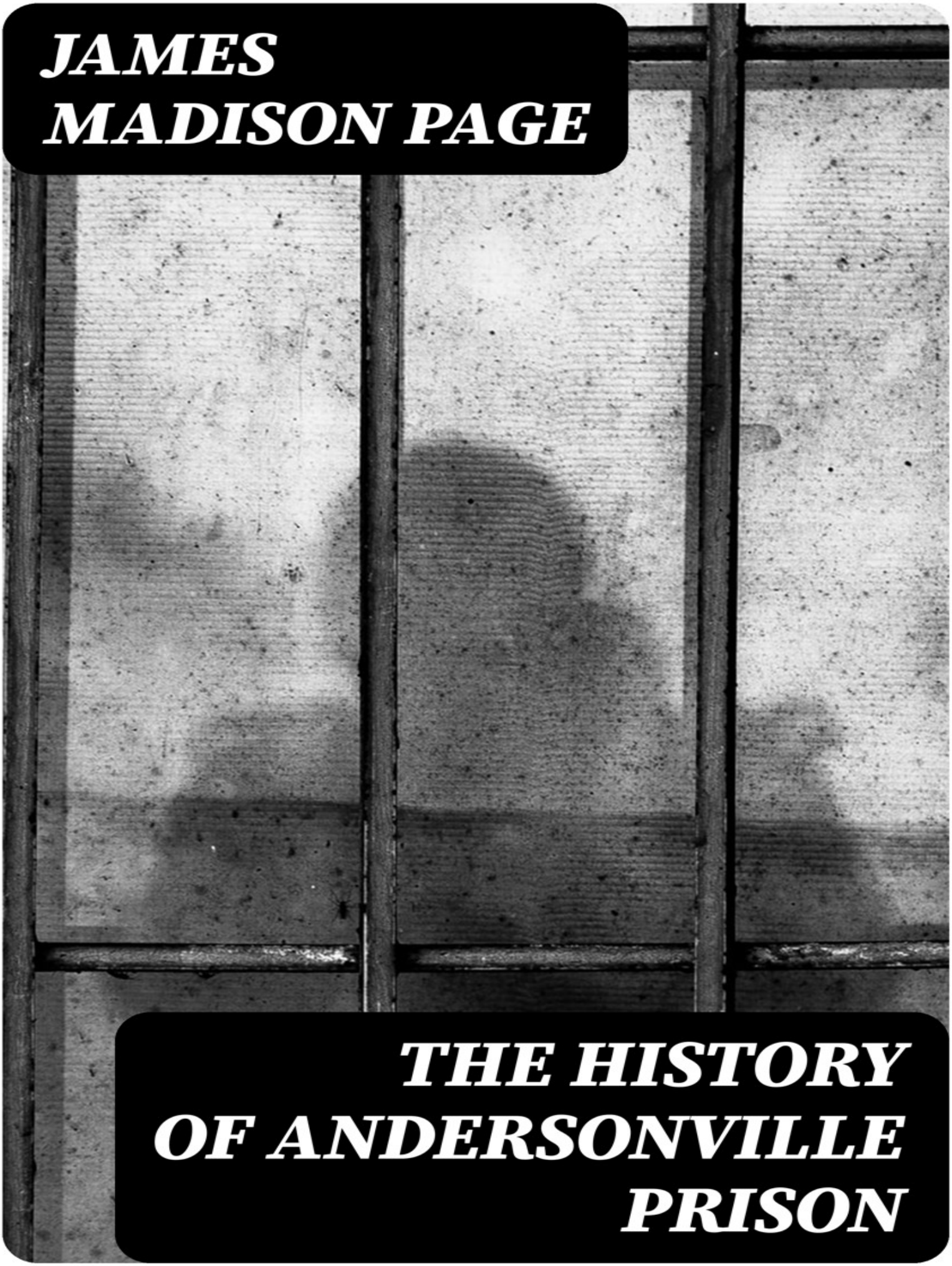

JAMES MADISON PAGE

THE HISTORY OF ANDERSONVILLE PRISON

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Preface

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During the past forty years I have read a number of stories of Andersonville Prison and of Major Wirz, who had subordinate charge of the prisoners there. Nearly all these histories were written by comrades who were confined there as prisoners of war. I do not propose in this work to question the accuracy of their portrayal of the great suffering, privations, and of the mortality of prisoners of war in Andersonville, for these are matters of fact that any one who was confined there can readily corroborate and can never forget. But it has been painful to me since the day I marched from that dismal prison pen, September 20, 1864, to the present time, that my comrades who suffered there and who have written their experiences are to a man wild in their charges that Major Wirz was responsible and that he was the sole cause of the suffering and mortality endured at Andersonville.

I have finally concluded to write something of my experiences in Southern prisons during the Civil War, not in a spirit of controversy, but in the interest of truth and fair play.

I was a prisoner in different places in the South from September 21, 1863, till November 21, 1864, seven months of which I was at Andersonville.

The story of Andersonville has been already too often written for the mutual welfare of North and South, for the story as written has tended to increase the friction between

the two great sections of our country. This is to be deplored, since every lover of his country desires, to the extent of his power, to allay all sectional bitterness.

The main purpose of the writer of this book is to reduce the friction between the two sections opposed to each other in the Civil War, and especially that caused by the exaggerated and often unjust reports of Major Wirz's cruelty and inhumanity to the Union prisoners, reports throughout the North at least, which have been represented to be gratuitous and wilful.

I am writing, not for the purpose of contradicting any comrade who has written before me, but to take a like liberty and to tell the story again from the standpoint of my own personal experience.

Taps will soon sound for us all who passed through those experiences, and I am sure that I shall feel better satisfied, as I pass down to the valley of death, if I say what I can truthfully say in defense of the man who befriended me when I was in the greatest extremity, and when there was no other recourse.

At the close of the war the feeling was so intense in the North on account of the suffering and mortality among the prisoners of war at Andersonville that something had to be done to satisfy the popular demand for the punishment of those supposed to be responsible for that suffering and the loss of life among the prisoners, and Major Wirz was doomed, before he was tried, as the party responsible for these results.

In my prison life of seven months at Andersonville I became well acquainted with Major Wirz, or Captain Wirz, as

he then ranked, and as he will hereafter be designated.

The knowledge I gained of his character during this personal acquaintance leads me to disagree with the conclusions reached by other writers as to the true character of this unfortunate man. During all these years it has been a matter of surprise to me that writers like Richardson, Spencer, Urban, and others failed to take into consideration the fact that Captain Wirz was but a subordinate under Gen. John H. Winder, who was the prison commander. Captain Wirz had charge only of the interior of the stockade, and in every way-he was subject to the orders of his superior officer

Nearly all these writers were soldiers, and should have known that obedience to superiors was imperative, and hence if there were fault or error in orders or in their execution it was to be charged against the superior and not the subordinate.

In this work I shall take the stand not only that Captain Wirz was unjustly held responsible for the hardship and mortality of Andersonville, but that the Federal authorities must share the blame for these things with the Confederate, since they well knew the inability of the Confederates to meet the reasonable wants of their prisoners of war, as they lacked a supply of their own needs, and since the Federal authorities failed to exercise a humane policy in the exchange of those captured in battle.

The reader may expect in this account only the plain, unvarnished tale of a soldier. The writer, "with malice toward none and charity for all," denies conscious prejudice, and makes the sincere endeavor to put himself in the other

fellow's place and make such a statement of the matter in hand as will satisfy all lovers of truth and justice.

Part I - Andersonville: The Prisoners and Their Keeper

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W. J. W. KERR, M. D.

My First Soldiering

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I was born in Crawford County, Pennsylvania, July 22, 1839, the youngest of the five children of Wallace and Nancy Bonney Page. My parents were natives of Massachusetts, the former born in 1810 and the latter in 1816, and they were married on April 18, 1832, at Ellington, Chautauqua County, New York. My father's paternal grandfather was a soldier in the War of the Revolution, and the maternal grandfather of my mother was a soldier at the same time. Both were "Continentals" in the "Massachusetts Line," and both were honorably mustered out of service, a matter that has been a source of pardonable pride to their descendants.

The reader will pardon me for intruding these facts and also some succeeding ones relating to my ancestors and' their descendants, but my purpose is to show how thoroughly "Yankee" I am in ancestry, birth, education, and environment. I never was as far south as Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, until I was a Union soldier on my way South.

My parents had five children: Elvira, Wallace Robert, Elmina, Rodney Walter, and myself, I being the youngest, We are all living, and have been for years residents of Pageville, Madison County, Montana.

In 1840 my father died when I was but one year old, and when I was thirteen my good mother died.

Soon after my father's death we removed to Michigan, where I received a good common school education and later I took a course at Eastman's business college at Chicago. I

had a keen taste for mathematics, and would at any time much rather encounter the most difficult problem in trigonometry than place myself between the handles of a plow.

When the war broke out in 1861 I was engaged in extending the public surveys in northwestern Minnesota, east of the now flourishing city of Morehead. At that time that portion of our Uncle-Samuel-land was "way out west," and as the region was sparsely settled I was very busy. My calling was a lucrative one, and being far from "the bustling throng and the busy haunts of men" I scarcely heard anything about the "impending conflict."

I was incredulous relative to the threatened "clash of arms." I had been so surfeited with the inflammatory war talk emanating from both North and South that I was disgusted. I regarded almost anything more likely to happen than actual war between the two great sections of our country.

As late as 1861 I little thought that the greatest war of history was to deluge our country with blood. Little did I think there would be calls by President Lincoln for soldiers ranging from 300,000 to 500,000 each, and little did I think that rivers of blood would flow through our land and that half the homes, both North and South, would be in mourning ere the great strife would cease.

I gave the matter little thought until the great disaster that befell the Federal forces under General McDowell at the first battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861. It could plainly be seen then that a gigantic struggle was at hand.

I was twenty-three when I enlisted in Company A, Sixth Regiment Michigan Cavalry, on August 14, 1862, at Grand Rapids, Mich., and was mustered into service August 28, 1862.

On December 10 the regiment proceeded to Washington, D. C., and went into camp on Meridian Hill between Seventh and Fourteenth streets. Our regiment was brigaded with the Fifth and Seventh Michigan Cavalry, and was attached to Casey's division of Heintzelman's corps. While at Washington I was promoted to commissary-sergeant.

During the winter of 1862-63 our regiment participated in several raids into Virginia, in one of which we went to Falmouth, where Burnside's army was encamped.

In the spring of 1863 the regiment broke camp at Washington and marched to Fairfax Court House, and was kept on picket duty till June of that year, Col. Geo. Gray commanding.

While on this duty the regiment often made raids to the west of Fairfax, outside of our lines, in quest of Colonel Mosby, who was continually disturbing our peace of mind.

In my official but non-combatant capacity of commissary-sergeant I had boyish, vague dreams of capturing Mosby myself, and single-handed. I could not think of anything that would more readily change my chevrons to shoulder-straps. Indeed, to be frank, I confess to a feeling of some importance when I looked down and saw my sleeves decked with commissary-sergeant's stripes, and I felt the stirring of military ambition like that of Napoleon's soldier who always carried a marshal's baton in his knapsack that he might be prepared to accept sudden promotion.

After we had become thoroughly conversant with Mosby's dashing tactics we were not half so anxious to capture him, and after forty odd years cogitation I feel satisfied that perhaps it is just as well that we didn't meet him at close range.

A number of incidents occurred while on these raids that might be interesting, but I'll record only one.

It was about the first of May, 1863, that Colonel Gray ordered the regiment ready to march light. Early the next morning we started in the direction of Winchester. It was understood that we were this time really to bag Mosby and his men, and the ambitious commissary-sergeant temporarily took leave of his accounts and supplies and rode with the fighting detachment. We picked up two or three of Mosby's "raiders," and toward noon we circled to the left and immediately passed through a small hamlet on the Winchester pike. In the edge of the town the regiment halted and dismounted for noon rest, when Colonel Gray called me and said, "Sergeant, did you notice that large mansion standing well back of a magnificent lawn, on our right a short distance back?" "Yes, sir." "Well, you take two non-commissioned officers and twelve men, ride back there, station your men around that house and adjacent buildings, and give them instructions to shoot any one attempting to escape that will not halt at a command, and then go through that mansion from cellar to garret and seize anything contraband that you find."

Of all my duties as a soldier this was the one I most detested.

I was soon on the ground and had stationed my men. I felt like a trespasser when I approached the door in company with Sergeant Parshall, whom I asked to go with me in case of trouble. (Dick Parshall was afterward one of Custer's best scouts.) When I rang the bell the door was opened by a fine-looking middle-aged woman, who, upon hearing my business, was not slow in conveying to me in language of scintillating scorn what she thought of me and the whole Yankee nation.

In my placid answer to her furious arraignment I said, "Madam, I am very sorry to disturb you and I do not wonder that you are greatly distressed at this action, but I am acting under orders, and if you knew how very disagreeable this task is to me you would deliver to me at once the key to every room in the house and facilitate the enjoined search as much as possible." Thereupon she reluctantly handed me a bunch of keys, and accompanied us to the third floor, where I made short work of my search and returned to the second floor. In the second room I entered I found three women, an unlooked-for find, and after a hasty search of the apartment I excused myself as gracefully as I could and retreated in good order.

Passing to another room on the same floor I was surprised anew to find five ladies, as unconcerned as though taking an afternoon tea and indulging in gossip.

My curiosity was piqued. It was not probable that these women all belonged to one household. What common purpose, I queried, had drawn them together?

I retreated again, and soon reached what seemed to be a front-room parlor on the same floor. The room was large,

and well filled with some fifteen or twenty women. As soon as I recovered from this, another shock of surprise, I said, "Ladies, I ask your pardon. I was not aware that there was a convention of women assembled here to-day, or I should have suffered arrest sooner than to have disturbed you." They did not seem to be in a humor to accept my apology, and the lady of the house, who was with me from the first, was joined by others of her pronounced opinions, and from this group of representative women I learned some things about myself and the Yankee army that I never knew before.

The sense of gallantry again overcame me, and I fell back before a superior force and was glad to retire from the unequal conflict.

I completed my search of the lower floor of the house as rapidly as possible. When I reached the front door, in taking my leave of the premises I handed the keys back to the mistress of the mansion and said, "Madam, I am very sorry that in obeying orders I have been the cause of so much annoyance to you, especially considering the unusual condition of your household."

I was about to bid her a respectful adieu, when I noticed a door at my right leading into a room some twelve by fifteen feet enclosing a portion of the porch. It had the appearance of having been built for a special secret purpose. Of course my duty required me to examine this room, and on finding it locked I asked for the key.

I shall never forget the look of consternation on the mistress's face upon my making this demand. This spirited woman, who during this short interview had steadily manifested a spirit of proud defiance, expressed in her

entire disparagement of the Yankee army and myself in particular, was now overcome with apprehension and alarm, which were manifest in her suddenly changed bearing.

She very reluctantly handed me the keys and turned away. During this time Parshall had gone to the opposite end of the porch and was talking to the guard. I finally unlocked the door, feeling sure that I should find some of Mosby's men, and, revolver in hand, I was prepared to meet them. What met my gaze was the climax of the day's surprises and explained those before encountered.

The room was filled to the height of six feet or more with choice articles of food, such as baked turkey, chicken, hams, bread, pastry and the like, disposed tastefully in tiers, one above another.

For a brief moment I wistfully surveyed this tempting array of choice food, so powerful in its appeal to a soldier's usually ravenous appetite. But as I reflected upon the choice treat prepared at great pains by the women, and upon the disappointment that would result from not being allowed to serve it, and hearing Parshall returning, I hastily locked the door and handed the key to the madam, who meanwhile had been anxiously watching me. I now bade her good-by, and signaled the guards to withdraw, and started down the walk. Almost immediately she was by my side, and said in a trembling voice, "I owe you an apology. I have often said there was not a gentleman in the Yankee army, but I must except one. You have placed me, with my neighbors and friends, many of whom you have just seen, under great obligation. My heart sank when you insisted on going into that room. I fully expected you and your men would despoil

us of the necessary food, prepared at great pains from our meagre resources. Imagine then my surprise when you locked the door so hastily for fear your comrade would see the contents of the room."

"Madam," I replied, "I thank you for your kind words, but I have only done my duty as I understand it. I am not in the army to increase the hardships of defenseless women. I assure you that I would gladly protect every one of them from the unnecessary hardships of this unfortunate strife. Their suffering is great—greater indeed than that of the men at the front, and is likely to increase as the war goes on."

This was a noble type of a Southern woman. She was particular to take my name, my company, and regiment, with the probable intent of making a definite record of this treatment, which she was pleased to regard as magnanimous. Months afterward, when suffering from hunger in Libby Prison and Belle Isle, I wished that I had taken her address, so that I might have sent to her for a loaf of bread or half a chicken such as I saw in her home once, for I believe it would have been forthcoming had it been in her power.

She gave me a cordial hand shake and a "God bless you" when we parted, which touched me deeply.

After joining my company and making my report to the Colonel, an irrepressible curiosity on the part of Dick Parshall prompted him to inquire about some of the late proceedings of this incident that were mysterious to him. For instance, he asked, "What in thunder did you and the madam find to talk about so long? I began to fear that she had captured you." "She did," I answered. "Well, how did it

happen?" he rejoined. "She appeared to take to you at the last to beat all. How did you manage it?" "By treating her and her friends as you and I would like to have our mothers and sisters treated under like circumstances," I replied. Again Dick broke out, "Say, old man, what did you find in that room on the porch? I was about to take a peep in there when you so suddenly closed and locked the door." "I will tell you some time, Dick, but not now," I replied.

After several days I let out the secret, and the boys laid it up against me as a special grievance that I did not give them the tip; for besides enjoying a luscious feast themselves, it would have been a good joke to beat Mosby and his men out of it.

A Sprint and a Capture

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Our regiment moved from Fairfax Court House on June 25, 1863, and when Hooker's army began its movement to intercept Lee, Stahl's division of cavalry was made a part of the Army of the Potomac at Edward's Ferry.

Kilpatrick succeeded Stahl in the command of the cavalry division and Col. Geo. A. Custer was promoted to the rank of brigadier-general from the rank of captain on Pleasanton's staff, and took Copeland's place in command of the Michigan Brigade, consisting of the First, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Michigan Cavalry regiments. General Custer was first seen by us at the battle of Hanover, Pennsylvania, June 30, 1863, which was the first time that the Sixth, our regiment, was under fire, except on the skirmish line at long range. At the battle of Gettysburg General Custer ordered Captain Thompson, of my company, to charge Gen. Wade Hampton's cavalry in a narrow lane on the eve of July 2, the second day of the fight.

A most desperate hand-to-hand conflict ensued. We went into this charge 77 men, rank and file, and next morning my company could rally but 26. In less than one-half hour we lost in killed, wounded, and captured, 51 men. Captain Thompson was wounded, and S. H. Ballard, our second lieutenant, whose horse was shot under him, was captured, and remained a prisoner to the close of the war. I received a slight saber cut on the head, but, strange as it may seem, I knew nothing about it until the next morning, when on being

awakened from a few hours' sleep I felt a peculiar smarting sensation on my head and found my hair matted with blood. A thorough washing revealed a slight cut on the top of my head, a wound about two inches long and only deep enough to draw blood. During "piping times of peace" at home it would have been considered quite a wound and I would have had the neighbors taking turns to look at it; but on the field of Gettysburg I would be laughed at for my pains if I showed it to any one, and I don't remember of any one knowing anything about it but myself. However, under the burning sun of that 3d of July it bothered me considerably, but I did not report it to the surgeons. We were too busy fighting the "Johnnies."

On July 4, at 10 a. m., our division being in advance, we marched from the sanguinary field of Gettysburg to intercept the enemy, who was retreating along the South Mountain road toward Williamsport. We marched by way of Emmettsburg up the road to Monterey, a small place as it appeared at night on the top of South Mountain range. On the 5th of July we had some skirmishing with the enemy's cavalry, and encamped that night at Boonsboro, Maryland.

On the 8th our regiment had an engagement with the enemy's cavalry on the Hagerstown road near Boonsboro, and three of our company were wounded. We were also engaged July 11, 12, 14, 20 and 24.

On July 14 our regiment was sharply engaged at the battle of Falling Waters, and had a number killed and wounded. Among the killed of the Sixth Michigan Cavalry were Capt. David G. Boyce and Maj. Peter A. Webber. I may be pardoned, perhaps, in quoting what was said about our

brigade at this battle, and particularly of the Sixth Michigan Cavalry, of which I was a member. The New York Herald contained the following:

"Hearing that a force had marched toward Falling Waters, General Kilpatrick ordered an advance to that place. Through some mistake, only one brigade, that of General Custer, obeyed the order. When within less than a mile of Falling Water the enemy was found in great numbers and strongly entrenched behind a dozen crescent-shaped earthworks. The Sixth Michigan Cavalry was in advance. They did not wait for orders, but one squadron, Companies C and D, under Captain Boyce (who was killed), with Companies B and F, led by Major Webber (who was killed), made the charge, capturing the works and defenders. It was a fearful struggle, the rebels fighting like demons. Of the no men engaged on our side, but 30 escaped uninjured. This is cavalry fighting, the superior of which the world never saw."

On this campaign our regiment had a strenuous time of it. For seventeen days and nights we did not unsaddle our horses except to readjust the saddle-blankets.

The next trouble we had was when we crossed the Potomac into Virginia in the rear of Lee's army and encountered Stuart's cavalry at Snicker's Gap, on July 19. The charge was simultaneous and I came near "passing in my checks," for I was knocked from my horse in the charge and was run over by half our regiment. I was stunned and badly bruised, but not cut. When I came to I was glad to find that my sore head was still on my shoulders. I was soon mounted, and our regiment went into camp.

We remained there next day awaiting rations, and, while riding from the quartermaster's tent to my company, I crossed a field that was overgrown with weeds and briers and ran against a gray granite slab. I dismounted, and pulling the briers aside, I saw that it was a gravestone. The inscription stated the man's name and age, which I have forgotten; the date of his death at an advanced age, in 1786, and concluded with this quaint inscription:

"Man, as you are passing by,
As you are now, so once was I;
As I am now, so you must be;
Turn to God and follow me."

This affected me deeply. The thought occurred to me that when in life (for he died but three years after the Revolution) how little he expected that the time would come when his beautiful domain and his bright sunny Southland would be devastated and laid waste by an invading army of his own countrymen!

From June 30 to September 21, 1863, our regiment participated in seventeen skirmishes and battles. On September 14, at Culpeper Court House, General Custer was wounded and the command of the brigade devolved upon Colonel Sawyer of the First Vermont Cavalry, which was brigaded with us at the time.

On taking command Sawyer seemed to think that the war had been going on long enough, and he decided to end it at once. Like Pope, his headquarters were in the saddle. "Up and at them" was his motto. He wasn't, as yet, even a brigadier by brevet, but visions of the lone star on his