

A Tragedy of the Potomac.

In the Potomac river, opposite the National Capital, and close to the Virginia shore, lies a small island of some twenty acres in extent, and which takes the name of "Mason" from its former owner. It is also known as Anatolian Island.

Since the war it has been a place of considerable resort for pleasure parties, the mansion and a large pavilion erected at a little distance from it affording ample room and accommodation for picnics, excursions and the like.

During the continuance of the great struggle between the North and South, the island (then united to the sacred soil of the Old Dominion by a narrow causeway, but which has since been partially destroyed), was occupied by the government, but the dwelling remained vacant—at least it was tenantless in 1861, and up to the time when the Army of the Potomac embarked for the Peninsula.

There was a deserted appearance about the place when I first knew it, reminding me of various stories of horror over which I had shuddered in my youthful days; but little did I think at that time a deed as dark and terrible as any of which I had read, was destined to be perpetrated within its precincts—a deed, too, of which I should be a witness.

The fearful scene of nearly twenty years ago has been freshly called to mind by notice, recently published in one of the leading papers of the day, of the death of the principal actor in the tragedy; and this event having absolved me from the promise exacted at the time, I propose to make the facts public, in the hopes that, by disposing of my secret, I may, at least to some extent, relieve myself of the burden it has for so long a period inflicted upon me.

After the first battle of Bull Run the regiment of which I was a member did garrison and guard duty upon the Virginia side of the Potomac, directly opposite the cities of Washington and Georgetown.

I was at that time a sergeant, and, as it happened, was frequently in charge of the guard stationed at the upper end of the island, where it was joined to the causeway already mentioned.

The post was an important one on account of its being immediately at the landing of the rope-ferry, which did duty until the steamboat Tallaqua furnished a more convenient means for transportation to and from the city, and the detail never comprised less than a dozen men.

The ferry-house close by was used for guard-quarters as well as for the accommodation of the boat-hands, who were civilians.

The Mason House, as old Washingtonians and all who were members of the Potomac army will know, stood, as it yet stands, but a short distance from the causeway, from which it is, or was, secured from view by a vigorous growth of shade and ornamental trees, and its appearance is, I presume, pretty much the same now that it was on a certain memorable night in the first year of the war.

Shortly after crossing into Virginia I had taken occasion to explore the mansion, and a queer old house it seemed to me.

The rooms upon and above the ground floor were cut up into curious little nooks and corners, with cupboards and dark recesses scattered about in the most unexpected localities. The basement, or more properly cellar, was divided by heavy walls of solid masonry into numerous dungeon-like compartments, lighted from without through heavily-barred openings, the tops of which were scarcely above the level of the grounds surrounding the building. Communication between the cells and with the outer world was cut off by oaken doors of massive construction and enormous strength, supplied with locks and bolts, but which from long disuse had grown rusty and immovable.

Those claiming to be well posted in the history of the place maintained that in former years the cellar had been used for wine and coal vaults and other general purposes, but to me it presented very much the appearance of a prison.

As already stated, I was frequently stationed at the ferry landing (alternating between that post and the Aqueduct bridge), and it nearly as often happened that the officer of the guard would chance to be Lieutenant G., of another regiment in the brigade from which the detail for guard duty was made up, headquarters being located at or near Hall's Hill, my own regimental headquarters near Fort Corcoran. The lieutenant was generally accompanied on his rounds by a youth of apparently not more than sixteen or seventeen years of age, and whom he introduced, when an introduction became necessary, as his brother. No two persons could be more unlike. The lieutenant was a well-developed and stalwart specimen of manhood, with a blonde complexion, light brown hair, and roguish twinkling eyes, were always upon the lookout for

something to laugh at, beside which he had a frank, hearty manner of meeting folks that was continually making new acquaintances and winning him new friends.

His companion on the contrary, was quite small for one of his apparent age, even, with dark curly hair, shading features perfectly regular, yet inclined to thinness, of the brunette order; and such eyes! No one ever succeeded in getting near enough to them, save the Lieutenant himself, to determine their color, but the judgment generally rendered was that they were a rich, dark brown. There was a shy, retiring disposition manifested by their owner that prevented any advances toward an intimate acquaintance being attempted, and hence it came about that we knew as little of the Lieutenant's brother in October as we had in the early part of August preceding, when he first made his appearance in our midst.

The battle of Ball's Bluff was fought upon the 20th or 21st of October, and during the night succeeding that event the greatest confusion prevailed. All the troops that could be spared from the fortifications were ordered up in the direction of Chain bridge, and those upon guard, myself included, were forced to remain on duty for more than forty-eight hours.

About midnight, or shortly after, Lieutenant G. came to me at the ferry landing, stating that he had been ordered out with his regiment, and was to start at once, and requested me to so inform his brother when he should arrive next morning from the city, whither he had gone the day previous on business. He also suggested that his brother should recross to Washington, and there remain at their "old stopping place" until the return of the troops. Receiving my promise to see his wishes carried out, he departed.

The next day I was much occupied by the throngs of troops, citizens and teams crossing the ferry, and it was not until evening that I remembered my pledge to the Lieutenant; and then, when I came to think of the matter, soon satisfied myself that his brother had not come over. To make sure, I interrogated the man stationed at the wharf, and who examined the passes in my absence, and he corroborated my belief.

Supposing that the youth had entered Virginia, if at all, by way of the Aqueduct or Long Bridge, I gave the subject no further thought.

The next morning Lieutenant G.'s regiment returned to camp, and he immediately sought me out (I was still on duty at the ferry); and upon learning that his brother was yet in the city, I immediately crossed over.

In about two hours he returned in a high state of excitement, with the information that his brother had left for camp the morning previous, and had not since been seen by any of his acquaintances.

He questioned myself and the men closely, and then went to the post on the Aqueduct, thence to Long Bridge, and about 3 A. M. returned to me, looking so haggard and broken down that I scarcely recognized him.

About 9 A. M. I was relieved from duty and through the agency of the Lieutenant, secured a pass to the city for forty-eight hours.

We immediately crossed by way of the Aqueduct, and beginning in Georgetown, entered upon a most exhaustive search for the missing one. We visited every known place of resort, inquired at the provost marshal's office, of the guards stationed throughout the two cities, of every soldier we met, and of citizens most likely to have observed the young man, but no trace could we obtain of him after he left the hotel where he had temporarily put up.

On my way back we began at the arsenal and followed along the wharves, making inquiries at every step, but without avail, until we had nearly reached the foot of Twenty-sixth street. We had just passed the Naval Observatory, when we encountered a contraband, who in answer to our questioning informed us that the evening before he had seen a small boat containing three men and a boy put off from the grounds south of the Observatory toward the Virginia shore. His description of the boy tallied exactly with that of the missing party.

Our informant was evidently concealing something, and to make him tell us all he knew, the Lieutenant threatened to put him under arrest and take him to the Provost Marshal as a suspicious character. Thereupon he admitted having occasionally done a little business with the soldiers on the sly, by taking over whisky and other good things in his boat; that the evening previous, when it was quite dark, two men had come to him and offered five dollars for the use of his boat an hour. This he refused unless he could go with it. Then they offered ten, and as the boat was an old one at the best, he let them have it, himself taking it down opposite the Observatory, where he found the two who had hired it, with the two others

indicated. Neither the men nor boat had returned.

One of the men lit his pipe before starting, and by the light of the match he was enabled to gather the description which he had given us of the Lieutenant's brother, as we were now convinced the boy was. But why was he in such company?

After these details we hastened to the ferry and embarked without delay.—When about half way across I caught a gleam of light, which seemed to come from the basement of the old Mason House, and called my companion's attention to it. At first he thought it might be a lantern, but as we had successive glimpses of it through gaps in the foliage of the tree and shrubbery we finally convinced ourselves that my first conclusion was right.

Upon landing I proposed that we investigate the matter. My familiarity with the habits of those whose duties took them into that neighborhood, added to the fact that there were stringent orders against trespassing upon the property, led me to believe all was not as it should be.

At first the Lieutenant demurred, but finally acceding to my wish, we passed down the carriage drive underneath the overhanging trees, and, making our way up to the building with the utmost caution, found that the light came from a small window on the side nearest the river, and which opened into one of the largest of the dungeon-like apartments in the cellar.

From the interior came the murmur of voices. Falling upon our hands and knees, we crept up until we could look through the cracks between the boards partially covering the window, and gazed within.

Had it not been for my hand placed hastily, and I fear rather heavy, over my companion's mouth, he would have cried aloud, and I must confess that it required all of my self-control to keep from uttering an exclamation of horror at what we saw.

In the further corner of the dungeon, partly reclining upon a pile of army blankets, lay the one for whom all Washington had been searched through and through. His hands were bound fast, and a short piece of wood, wrapped with canvas, was firmly held between his distended jaws, preventing any successful attempt at outcry.

There was a wild, pleading look in his eyes, coupled with a settled expression of horror, which it seems to me must have moved the heart of even the most relentless savage. His face was as pale as the face of a corpse, and there were marks of violence visible upon it, giving fearful evidence of most brutal treatment.

In front of him, at about the centre of the cell, around a box upon which burned two tallow dips, were seated four men, or beings having the forms of men, playing cards. A black bottle stood near at hand, from which each in turn helped himself.

I heard the click of the lock as the Lieutenant cocked his revolver, and was just in time to prevent him from shooting the miscreants, or one of them at least. My next step was to withdraw him, almost by main force, from the scene. When we had retired a short distance, a hurried consultation was held, and it was decided that an effort should be made to capture the gang.

I went to the guard-house and easily procured the services of the men off-duty, and led them back to the mansion, posting a sentinel wherever there was necessity for so doing, in order to prevent an escape.

The Lieutenant, with the remainder of our force, passed around to the rear, where there was an outside entrance to the cellar, prepared to arrest any who might attempt to flee by that route; or, if necessary, to break in the door and gain admission to the interior.

I resumed my station at the window, and when satisfied every arrangement had been made, called out: "You are surrounded; yield yourselves prisoners or you will be fired upon." In an instant the lights were extinguished, and the next moment I heard a deep groan and a gurgling, half-suppressed cry of mortal agony.

There was a confused rush toward the back of the house, succeeded by a few heavy blows, a short, sharp struggle, curses, groans, a thud, a fall, and when I reached the Lieutenant he was bending over the prostrate body of one of the villains, clutching his throat with what would have proved a death grip had I not interposed.

All four of the rascals were now securely fastened (one of them had been bayoneted through the body in his endeavor to escape and died in a few minutes) and our next thought was of their victim.

Groping my way inside, I struck a match and relit one of the candles. As I did so the Lieutenant, who was close beside me, gave one bound to the side of his brother, who was lying back upon the blankets, and took him in his arms. Then he became senseless. I hastened

to his side and unlocked his arms from the slender form, and as I did so saw for the first time what appeared to be an ugly knife wound in the youth's left breast.

Hastily tearing open the garments to discover the extent of the injury, I made another discovery, which sent a thrill through every fibre of my being. The Lieutenant's supposed brother was a woman. But the cruel knife had too well done its work. She was dead.

Gathering the bloody clothing over the pulseless heart, I laid the unfortunate creature down, and, calling in one of the men to help, bore the Lieutenant outside, where he soon revived.

"Lulu! Lulu! Oh, God!" he moaned. "Dead! dead!" He seemed for several minutes completely overcome by his great grief, and with no more strength than a child.

Suddenly he aroused and sprang to his feet with the leap of a panther. Walking to the side of one of the villains, lying prostrate and helpless upon the earth, he brought the heel of his boot down in his face, crushing the features out of all semblance of humanity. Before I could intervene he had reached the second, who, turning his head just in time, received the iron-shod heel upon the cheek, which was laid open to the bone by the glancing blow. Then giving way to another fit of weeping, the Lieutenant entered the cellar; I followed close behind. He took the dead form in his arms, removed the cruel gag, kissed the swollen lips, the ashen cheeks, the dark curly hair, and, spurning my proffered assistance, bore her out beneath the stars and laid her tenderly down upon the grass, not far removed from her murderers. Then he flung himself down by her side and wept as strong men seldom do.

After some little time I went to him, laid a hand upon his shoulder, saying: "Lieutenant, what are we to do with these men?" He sprang to his feet at the sound of my voice like one suddenly awakened from sleep.

"Yes, it is time for vengeance," he grunted out between his set teeth. "I am ready."

"But what do you intend doing?" I queried. "Shall I turn the prisoners over to the guard?"

"No, no," he hastily responded. "This night's work must remain a secret with ourselves, and—call up the men and instruct them that not a word be whispered of what has transpired."

I did as he commanded, and, at his request, sent back to quarters all but two, upon whom I knew reliance could be placed, and these were despatched after a small boat kept by the ferrymen for use on occasion, and which was soon moored at the edge of the island to the northward of the mansion. Still acting under the Lieutenant's instructions, the prisoners, including the body of the one who had been slain, were borne down and placed in the yawl, and the Lieutenant himself soon followed, bearing his victim.

I brought up the rear. When all were embarked, the soldiers took the oars and pulled steadily up the river, keeping near the centre of the stream, and observing the utmost caution in order to avoid detection.

Passing under the aqueduct, we struck over toward the Virginia shore and kept on our course until we reached the rapids just below the Chain bridge.—There we ran the boat into a small sequestered cove on the south side of the river, and made a landing. The Lieutenant was the first to step ashore with his ghastly load, after which the rest of us followed and lifted out the prisoners.

The darkness was intense, but by the aid of an occasional match we succeeded in groping our way to the base of an overhanging cliff of rocks, and there, with our hands and the bayonets of the two soldiers, we at length managed to dig a shallow grave, well above high-water mark, in which we buried the poor creature whose life had gone out under such tragic circumstances.

The sad duty accomplished, the Lieutenant, who had thus far spoken scarcely a word since leaving the island, advanced to one of the prisoners and, before I had time to interfere or utter a word, placed his revolver against the man's head and pulled the trigger.

I sprang forward and caught the hand holding the weapon, but it was wrench'd from my grasp with such force as to nearly throw me over backward into the water. "Stand back! stand back!" cried the Lieutenant, "or by Heaven I'll kill you! Stand back, I say!"

I called upon the two men to assist me in disarming the madman, as he seemed to be; but before we could gather around him two more pistol shots rang out upon the night air, and there were four corpses where there had been but one upon landing.

"Now help me to dispose of this carion," said the Lieutenant, in a strangely altered voice. "Into the river with it."

We loaded the bodies down with rocks

and sunk them in the deep water of the cove, and entered the boat, hastened from the scene, reaching our quarters about daylight.

Our comrades of the night previous, who had witnessed the first act of the tragedy, were anxious to know the ending, but we were dumb.

Rumors of the affair reached headquarters, and we were ordered up and closely interrogated but divulged nothing.

The occurrence had begun to die out of mind somewhat, when the heavy freshet succeeding the Ball's Bluff affair brought many dead bodies down upon its turbid tide. One day I was on the Island in command of a squad engaged in retrieving the corpses from the water. One caught upon the ferry-boat and I went out with a boat to bring it in. As the line was being made fast to the body the face came uppermost, and I recognized one of the victims who fell beneath the Lieutenant's avenging bullets.

That same evening two others came floating by, were dragged to land, and all three were buried near the centre of the island, not far from where the crime for which they suffered had been committed.

I soon lost sight of the Lieutenant altogether, he going up the valley with Shields, I to the peninsula.

Before we separated I approached him on several occasions with a view to discovering a key to the mystery enveloping the affair in which I had played an unwilling part, but could get no satisfaction.

"It is nobody's business but my own," he would reply. "You may rest assured, however, that she was worthy of any man's love and respect. She did not cast off her woman's garments."

He would make no further explanation. One thing seemed to puzzle him as much as the whole matter did myself. He could not conceive what led his companion into the association which proved so fatal, nor could I. To me it was a mysterious affair throughout, and remains so to this day. My belief is that the unfortunate woman was the Lieutenant's wife. I can give no reason for thinking such to be the case further than this: One day I came upon him suddenly and unexpectedly. He was in the guard tent waiting for grand rounds.

I entered to notify him that the men were ready, and found him sitting, his elbows on the table, his head supported by his hands, and lying open before him a letter, the writing of that of a woman. I barely noticed the caption. It was dated July 30, 1861, and addressed to "My Dear Husband."

Upon becoming aware of my presence he quickly folded up the missive and placed it in an inner pocket over his heart. Within a week we parted never to meet again.

Now that he is dead I am, if anything, more than ever inclined to cast over his memory the mantle of that charity which believeth no evil; and yet in this narrative have simply given the outline of facts which brought us two together in one of the most thrilling episodes of a not uneventful life—an episode, too, which helps to prove the old saying that "truth is often stranger than fiction."

Traveling in Louisiana.

Traveling has its drawbacks in certain parts of the country, and of no other section does this remark hold more true than of the small towns in the neighborhood of New Orleans. A gentleman who has just returned from a trip across the lake gives his experience of how he was treated during his stay in one of the towns near the lake shore. He stopped at the "hotel," so called, and was shown his apartments by "mine host," who assured him that he should have the very best his house afforded.

The gentleman feeling as if soap and water would not be at all inappropriate after his all-day ride, asked for the necessary materials for an ablution. The proprietor disappeared, and shortly afterward returned with a tin basin and water, and a small piece of the commonest soap manufactured, that looked as if it had been preserved as a curiosity. The old fellow said: "You can wipe your face on the sheet," pointing to the bed, as the towels have given out."

The supper, what there was of it, was very scant, and consisted of one Irish potato, an egg, and a piece of bread and a half cup of milk. In the morning the traveler woke up after a long tussle with specters and insects, and called for his bill, resolved to vacate the premises at the earliest moment. The bill amounted to five dollars.

Be Wise and Happy.

If you will stop all your extravagant and wrong notions in doctoring yourself and families with expensive doctors or humbug cure-alls, that do harm always, and use only nature's simple remedies for all your ailments—you will be wise, well and happy, and save great expense. The greatest remedy for this, the great, wise and good will tell you, is Hop Bitters—rely on it.—See another column.—*Press.*