

AMONG THE COTTON THIEVES

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Among the Cotton Thieves by Edward Bacon

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EDWARD BACON

**AMONG THE
COTTON THIEVES**

A M O N G
THE
COTTON THIEVES.

BY EDWARD BACON,
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PREFACE.

To bring back in mind the scenes of the Department of the Gulf has been interesting to me. I have endeavored to make written pictures of those scenes which may be interesting to others. There are witnesses in all parts of the country who can testify whether the picture is like the reality. I offer no excuses for using plain words and proper names.

If the short-lived unwritten history of the civil war should seem to show that the system of military despotism, which has been handed down to our times substantially the same as it was in the days of Xerxes, is nothing but a system of man-worship, no less evil and absurd for any intelligent people in time of war, than it would be in time of peace, there is no doubt that the orthodox written history of the war will come to the rescue of the old system, and demonstrate its excellence in every way.

AMONG THE COTTON THIEVES.

"Calla, amigo Sancho," respondió Don Quijote, "que las cosas de la guerra mas que otras estan sujetas a continua mudanza."

CHAPTER I.

General Williams—His difficulties with the Mississippi River—The Sixth Michigan and the "Order of Combat."

It is a July day in 1862. From an early hour Farragut's gunboats and sloops-of-war have been going down the river at Baton Rouge, and the transports that bear the troops of General Thomas Williams have been arriving from the expedition against Vicksburg. A crowd collects at the levee. There are the blue caps of Federal soldiers, the broad-brimmed planters' hats, the uncovered woolly heads of negroes, and the glossy beavers of well dressed Jews. At windows and porticos, here and there, appear a few white women of the poorest sort, and some quadroon beauties, whose gay attire and finely curled ringlets indicate that they have not been losers by the Federal conquest.

A characteristic order of the General has forbidden the troops to land, and the crews of the gunboats left for duty at Baton Rouge seem wondering what the transports full of half-dead men and horses are doing so long in the middle of the stream.

Southerners in the crowd are smiling, and talk freely about the failure of the Vicksburg ditch. The Mississippi has proved too much for General Williams, and the Hill City is not yet made an inland town; his last device of making a little narrow ditch along the middle of the first ditch, in the vain effort to overtake the falling waters of the river, and lead them where he

willed them to go, in no way helped the matter. A little trickling stream got through feebly, and in a few hours ceased to flow, although an old stern-wheel steamer had been kept at work at the upper end of the ditch, to force the water, by the action of the wheel, to obey the General's will. Some of the talkers think that the General's pride would not have allowed him to yield on account of the havoc made by sickness among his troops, had it not been for the appearance and doings of the rebel run Arkansas.

At length, the General, with his florid countenance and his precisely cut grizzly hair, whiskers and mustache, comes ashore, duly attended by some of his obsequious staff officers. As the General steps on the plank held for his security, and then on the land, he glances at the crowd, and seems greatly satisfied with himself. He is escorted to the quarters prepared for him, without deigning to recognize officer or citizen. He appears to have made up his mind to try that dogma of his faith and early instruction, which is, that a sufficient display of authority is all that is necessary to make subordinates cease to think of the folly or crime of a commander, and that nothing is too absurd for a ruler to make the multitude believe. Next comes Nims' Battery, which, before the expedition, astonished Baton Rouge with its fine condition and abilities, that even justified its puffs by Boston newspapers. Now what a change. The gaunt, skeleton horses, hang to the ground the heads that they once held up with proper *esprit de corps*. Even the worn and cracked harness seems too much for them to carry. The guns and carriages are smeared with Vicksburg mud, and marred by the action of heat and rains. I meet a quartermaster of the expedition. He tells me, "We have come back. We ought to have come back sooner. That ditch would not work; the soldiers knew that it would not work. It made me sick to see them die as they did. We buried men everywhere. There were not well men enough to bury the dead. The men were lying around in the mud, exposed to the hot sun and the rain, without much of anything fit to eat. They looked

as if they would be glad to die, to get out of their misery. And the ditch itself will be no greater wonder than some of the orders and performances contrived every day. I was glad when the old ram came and started us down stream, for before that there was a fair prospect that we would have to keep digging in that ditch all summer."

The Ninth Regiment of Connecticut Volunteers, the Fourth Regiment of Wisconsin, and the Seventh Regiment of Vermont, are beginning to land as the heat of the day comes on. The faces of officers are changed, as if by ten years of care and trouble. The men appear like wretches escaped from the dungeons of the Inquisition; every face and form shows the effect of long continued exercise in tortures, and expectations of a miserable death. Numerous buildings have been seized for hospitals, and confused processions of the sick, some in ambulances and wagons, some in litters, and some staggering along on foot, present scenes of horror in every street. This day the surgeons' command outnumbers that of the General, and passengers hourly departing for the country carry faithful reports to the confederate outposts, while the frequent firing of funeral escorts causes reports and camp rumors that the long expected attack is about to begin.

My regiment, the Sixth Michigan Infantry, occupies the comfortable brick barracks at Baton Rouge. A long sea voyage, with three thousand men crowded on board one steamer, the sufferings of Ship Island, followed by many weeks of life on transports off the Southwest Pass and again during the first Vicksburg expedition, have conspired, with the climate and the recent change from civil life, to prostrate with sickness half of my regiment; but the excellent shelter afforded by the United States barracks is likely to enable the regiment to pass the dangerous hot season without increase of disease. For several weeks we have buried a man every day, but the numbers of those whom former sufferings have marked for the grave is growing less, and the appearance and step of the men show that vegetable food, and protection from the hot sun, are