

## Chapter v

Last days of the Confederacy - Fatal explosion of the steamer Sultana - And lights out.

In the following Chapter there is involved the undertaking of recording a portion of history that was virtually lost sight of as a part of the cost of the war for the Union, occurring as it did in the triumph of victory for the Federal Army, amid so many events of National interest that were transpiring in such rapid succession.

The Confederacy was struggling in the last stage of annihilation, the bright beacon light of American Justice had just gone out and the great emancipator who had finished American Freedom lay cold in death, the curtain had dropped on the last act of his assassin John Wilkes Booth.

The North was bathing her victory in tears, flags of victory waved at half mast on the ramparts of surrendered heights, and the peoples love and affection were being offered on the shrine of a nations sorrow.

While these memorable events were holding the American people spell bound, over fifteen hundred lives went out in the morning of victory from the fatal steamer Sultana, to escape into oblivion and untold history. The explosion of the steamer Sultana in the early morning of



April 28<sup>th</sup> 1865 was one of the greatest and most fatal disasters that ever occurred on American waters.

The loss of our magnificent man of war Maine in the harbor of Havana February 15<sup>th</sup> 1898 with a loss of life of two hundred and forty, dwindles into insignificance comparatively speaking, yet, this disaster, was cabled to every port of entry in the civilized world; and in ten hours the News boys in four hemispheres were distributing the story of the lost Maine.

On the evening of April 26<sup>th</sup> 1865 there lay moored at the wharf of Vicksburg the large staunch and magnificent Steamer Sultana, the sun was just sinking to rest, casting its last rays, across the Commodious decks of the fated Steamer, that was being fast filled with two thousand seven hundred weary, care worn paroled prisoners of war, three fourths of whom had shared with me the bitter experience of Cahaba.

But now those weary men in freedom filed eagerly over the stage plank to board the grand old steamer that was to bear them home, the old flag floated at the mast head and was greeted, with patriotic airs that made the welkin ring.

While this happy throng mingled together on the decks of the steamer in the beautiful



southern twilight; lets us return to parole  
Camp where had come the weary and foot-  
sore host from Cahaba. We will look now  
briefly at the condition of the war.

Sherman had marched from Atlanta to the  
Sea. The strong Confederate position held  
by Lee at Richmond had been surrendered  
to Grant, and the last days of the Confederacy  
was drawing nigh.

Remnants of former strong forces were  
braking up into isolated battalions; and  
the South was being over run with scattered  
fragments from the Confederate lines; no  
brave and honorable Soldier of the north  
could look with hatred upon his former  
foe as he turned his face towards his  
desolate home, and who, is there to ques-  
tion the action of the magnanimous Grant  
who said to Lee. let your men retain their  
horses they will need them to raise  
bread for their children; these men had  
earned nothing during the war, there was  
to be no provision for them on the pay rolls of  
the Nation. Though I believe as a rule the  
Confederate returned to his home with a  
brave heart to retrieve his almost irrepar-  
able losses. Yet I have never let the impression  
of victory fix the delusion in my brain



4

that, the superior bravery of the North was responsible for Southern defeat, every impartial veteran of the Northern Army calls to memory with national pride the daring bravery of the South and the future security of a United People rests largely on the bravery of the South.

While in Parole Camp a few hundred of exchange Confederates passed our Camp going South, these men were well dressed and in good flesh we interviewed many of them as to their treatment, the answer was in keeping with their looks, they had been furnished all the food they wanted, with good quarters. It did really look like a one sided trade to exchange such men as those, for Cahaba wrecks; yet, I think enough National Charity might have been realized in the exchange to have made up for our lost flesh.

Confederate money at this time had become almost worthless, many of my comrades had secured a few dollars of Confederate paper for a curiosity to take home, to illustrate the Confederate faith in the redemption of this money, I will relate the following story told me of a Confederate Colonel. Who was well stocked with Confederate paper



about the time the Confederacy began to crumble. He was anxious to put this money into any thing that had a future value, he approached a Confederate soldier who was riding a good horse and offered him several hundred dollars in Confederate paper for the animal, the soldier abruptly refused the offer, saying, he had just given one hundred and fifty dollars to get him curried, these kind of graybacks had become a dead issue, but the kind so numerous in Cahaba was legal tender at least we had to take them.

The remainder of the Cahaba prisoners had arrived in camp, also about eight hundred from Andersonville, one or two boat loads of prisoners had already gone up the river bound for Camp Chase Ohio, to remain until discharged. I was waiting anxiously until I should start north and on the twenty sixth of April as already stated the order came for twenty seven hundred.

Now we will return to the Vicksburg wharfs the Sultana has just slipped her cable and is moving off around the great horse shoe bend, let us look at this picture a moment, as the powerful and majestic steamer with her burden of human freight



bravely swings her fore mast around to meet and battle with the strong current. She has been the pride of the Mississippi for many years, in strength, magnitude, and beauty of model, though she is leaving the Vicksburg wharf never to return. I am looking back through the memory of over thirty years to catch the last glimpse of that fated steamer, as she pulls out in to the coming night. In the soft breeze there is wafted back again to my ear the sweet melodious strains of "Home Sweet Home" the faint echo of the refrain dies away on the water, and the old Sultana is lost to view. The stars come out and the tired and hopeful soldiers are soon lost in quiet slumber, to dream of home that now seems so near; letters written home from Vicksburg had made many hearts glad with the hope of soon seeing those that had been in exile so long: many a mother that had waited long and patiently to see her boy again, knew he was coming and that night they were resting secure in the faith of the many prayers that seemed now to have touched the throne in the great city beyond "God bless my boy and bring him home again, that supplication



is nearly answered. That night of the 26<sup>th</sup> of April was one of the most delightful nights we had experienced since arriving in the Federal lines. The morning of the twenty seventh dawned clear and bright the light gray in the east was hiding the stars above us and the sun like burnished <sup>gold</sup> came up to shed her dazzling rays on the waters, and <sup>the</sup> beautiful Spring foliage that on either side were dipping their branches in the blue waters of the Mississippi.

The day was perfect in every respect and we were jubilant as each stroke of the ponderous engine of the Sultana was sending us nearer to our homes. Late in the afternoon, we reached Memphis where, we were detained until midnight, then was removed from the hull of the boat five hundred hogheads of sugar, this cargo of freight seemed immense to me as it lay on the wharf. Even after twelve o'clock that night the steamer pulled over to the Arkansas shore where was anchored a great field of coal barges, and I fell asleep while they were taking on coal, and I afterwards learned that we left the coal station about three o'clock on the morning of the twenty eight. The first thing I knew after falling



asleep I found myself struggling in the water at least thirty yards from the wrecked steamer, I was clinging to a portion of the wreck and had almost past that stage where strangulation ends in death; reason, had undoubtedly been dethroned for a short time, a peculiar burning sensation was in my head, and I suppose from the natural instinct of one partially drowned I had caught to a piece of the wreck to which I was clinging; though I was soon fully conscious and wide awake to the great disaster before me. Immediate action was necessary, for drowning men were all about me in the desperate struggle for any and every thing that could be caught hold of, the wrecked steamer was now in flames and cast a sickly glare of light over the great horror about me, men were clinging to each other with fatal results, many that could ~~have~~ otherwise <sup>perhaps</sup> saved themselves, were caught by drowning comrades and pulled down to death, I fortunately managed to steer clear of this great mass of drowning humanity, I secured a small piece of plank about three feet long, and placing this across my breast, I was able with a little difficulty to keep my head well above the water, I discovered now from whence came the burning pain in my head;



Above my right eye was an ugly wound that was bleeding freely, also a bad wound in left knee, with left wrist out of place and a painful scald on the breast, yet, I did not realize the full extent of my injuries under the excitement, and I had but little difficulty in reaching the timber on the west side of the river. This was a low flat bottom and was covered with water, though I found a drift and climbed upon it, I was now in Arkansas, this was my first trip to this state and I had come by water on a plank just before day in the morning.

That side of the river I thought needed a levee, yet, I suppose they had taken the Arkansas travelers' view of things over there, and that the water, was then too high to build a levee, and when the water went down it did not need any. If Arkansas had ~~of~~ stayed in the Union and built levees instead of wasting time in getting licked, it would ~~have~~ been better for me and Arkansas too.

Five other Contrads made this same landing. I now began to realize the extent of my injuries and if I had been rolled off that drift I never could ~~have~~ climbed back unaided, looking back at the burning steamer which was now a sheet of flame, the whole upper deck seemed



to have been totally wrecked by the explosion, and settling down pinned hundreds of the unfortunate to the lower deck, who were being burned alive; we could see from the drift many poor helpless victims near the bow of the boat who were calling pitifully for help, one of our number on the drift had a brother on the boat and he imagined he heard his brothers voice calling to him for help, this drove the brave comrad to a maden frenzy, he declared his intention to return to the boat to aid his brother; with a great bleeding wound in his leg he was ready to give up his life, for his brother we tried to impress upon him, the recklessness of such an undertaking, the great agony in his soul, and the bleeding wound was more than the poor man could bare and he fainted away on the drift, others holding him to keep him from rolling off in the water. Hundreds of sad pathetic scenes that had been witnessed on that fatal morning will never be told.

The once magnificent Sultana was now a smoldering ruin all had become quiet at the wreck, death had come in over the fatal scene and hushed the last pleading cry for help.



All's quiet on the water now  
Where stood that burning deck  
The old Sultan's sunken prow  
Has hid the fatal wreck.

Lost comrades there now quiet sleep  
To hunger, thirst no more  
The angry waves their vigils keep  
From off the woodland shore.

You might wonder why it was that men could become so indifferent seemingly to such a great disaster as this, though men can train under desolation so long, that they can meet death apparently with no fear, I have studied this phase of human nature, in nine months schooling at Cahaba, and I believe under certain conditions men can become mentally reconciled to meet almost any disaster, Any man in the ordinary walks of life to suddenly fall in the hands of a frenzied mob who sought his life, would beg and plead for mercy, though keep that man facing death for a few months and he will train for the day of execution, and on the fatal day he will step out on the death trap, calm, cool, and collected, he will have simply trained the horror and fear out of death and he meets it with an indifference



that you would class as an exceptional make up of human nature. Yet, it is not an exception, and on that fatal morning of the explosion of the Steamer Sultana it was not singular that the old Cahaba spirit of indifference was there, for all up and down the river, out on the broad bosom of the Mississippi, and away across on the Tennessee shore, came the old Cahaba slang, wit, and song, some one above perched on a Arkansas limb was repeating the old Cahaba guard call, by singing out Post number twenty six four o'clock and wet as a rat. This great disaster and fatal explosion occurred about seven miles above Memphis and was heard in that city, many boats hastened from there to the rescue, yet arriving too late to be of material aid in saving life, only so far as rescuing those that had made shore, and picking up those that were clinging to portions of the floating wreck. These were conveyed to the Memphis Wharf. To say, they were pitiful looking objects of humanity does not express fully the real picture, yet, so fresh in my memory. Very few of the rescued had escaped without serious injury and here at the wharf to meet those wounded, bleeding Sultana Survivors was a large delegation of the Sanitary Christian Commission who aided



in transferring them to the hospital. These women were good, brave, and true Christians, and enough praise has never been given them, for their many kind and Christian acts performed for the comfort of the suffering Soldiers.

After I had been taken to the hospital I was given some medicine that made me sleep until four o'clock in the afternoon, I awoke to find one of these grand ladies of the Sanitary Christian<sup>n</sup> Commission examining my descriptive card at the head of my cot, she was getting the address of my parents in the hoosier state, to write home for me, and this letter a few days later <sup>was</sup> evidence to my mother that God had spared her boy and would bring him home again.

The Memphis papers, the following morning after the explosion had this announcement, "The most fatal disaster that ever occurred on American waters was the explosion of the famous steamer Sultana seven miles above this city on the morning of the twenty eight with twenty seven hundred paroled prisoners of war, the loss of life is over fifteen hundred with several hundred fatally injured now in the Memphis hospitals." Two days later an official report in a Memphis paper placed the loss of life at fifteen hundred and forty eight. I can refer you to no definite official report of the facts, yet, I am confident



that over three hundred died from injuries received in the explosion, admitting this supposition to be correct, it would swell the loss of life to nearly nineteen hundred and at least sixteen hundred of those were from Cahaba prison, you can now easily infer from these figures why Cahaba prison was not very well advertised, from the fact that most of our advertising medium had been wiped out of existence since the previous January. I will not give a detailed account of my remaining days with Uncle Sam. We left Memphis in small detachments as soon as able to go north, I had been in Memphis about ten days when I was placed on the list as able for transportation, and late one evening a few of us drew three days rations and repaired to the Memphis wharf to board a boat for St Louis, the name of this boat was the City of Alton, she was a trim, neat, craft, about one half as large as the Sultana, and a regular New Orleans and St Louis packet. As soon as I boarded this boat I felt nervous, the memory of the recent disaster was a little too recent to make the situation desirable, I slept very little that night, every time I would get in a doze the city of Alton would blow up, I tried very hard to overcome this superstitious fear, though I could not,



TUXEDO

yet, I kept my own counsel, for I was ashamed to admit to my comrades next morning what a scared hoosier I had been all night, though I was somewhat relieved when I heard my comrades comparing notes of the horrible night they put in with the same fear, and I concluded that I was about as brave to the square inch as any of my comrades; The man having our transportation papers declared we would get off at Cairo that evening and if the provost marshal would not change our transportation, we would walk to St Louis rather than go by boat, so when we arrived at Cairo, we followed him over the stage plank, this was contrary to orders, yet, we felt we had just provocation to disregard military orders in this instance, yet, it is not very healthy to do such things, for we knew that the golden rule in military life had but one side to it, do unto Uncle Sam as he requests you, this is all there is to it, though we found the provost marshal at Cairo ready to sympathize with us, and he changed our papers.

Now as I near the close of this work, which has been necessarily brief, not for want of material, or foundation upon which a more elaborate historical work might be written



But from want of <sup>Literary Ability</sup> ~~Capacity~~ for handling the material and compiling it so that I may acquit myself creditably before my readers. Therefore the task of the foregoing has been accomplished under disadvantages to the author. In conclusion let me say to my comrades, although my experience while a prisoner of war was a bitter one, yet, I have enough charity for the South, to hide all bitterness beneath the green sward that covers these sacrifices of the North and the South.

The gray with the blue are the nations dead, who hear the sound of the long roll no more. And to the blue and the gray that yet remain is gently falling the soft notes of lights out, they have passed the meridian of life and are fast descending the declivity of the western horizon, the bright rays of the setting sun is casting golden threads around the blue and the gray, and in the quiet evening of life, while the somber shades and mystic twilight steals softly over the care worn warriors of the past, there, opens out like a scroll before them, on which is indelibly imprinted the memory of the past. And again is seen the dark clouds of war that roll with the clash of steel, and cannons roar,



from Sumter to Appomatox. Again they see the  
 slain and the dying, the sons of Americas for man,  
 the kindred blood of the blue and the gray that  
 is painting crimson the field of battle. though  
 the last burden that incumbered American  
 liberty and freedom was being washed away  
 with the noblest blood of the land, and there  
 stood weeping over this scene of carnage the  
 bright Angel of American liberty whose mandates  
 assembled the nations heroes of the past, that went  
 forth in the early dawn of our freedom to build  
 our fame on the ruins of tyranny in the new  
 world. To bear our emblem of American justice  
 above the heights of Bunker Hill. The icy waters of  
 the Delaware, and the wintery storms of Valley Forge,  
 to plant it triumphantly over the usurpation and  
 the cruelties of the old world. The stained foot  
 prints that mark the sacred pages of American  
 history, come up to us sacred alike from the  
 silent graves of the South where sleep the blue  
 and the gray. who we know were patriotically  
 and conscientiously right, though nationally  
 wrong. For divided we should have fallen,  
 though united we shall stand. For we have  
 seen this side of Appomatox another army  
 assemble from the North and the South beneath  
 the same flag, to drive tyranny from under  
 the shadow of our land, we saw them clasped



hands over the ruins of the Maine, we saw them  
 ascend the steps of Santiago, driving to defeat  
 the sullen foe, we heard the thundering notes  
 of our navy from below, that obliterated the  
 last vestige of a tyrant's marine power  
 in the Western Hemisphere.

O'erween's daring fleet that ventured out the bay  
 Now beneath the wave in shattered ruin lay  
 As we look upon the scene amid the wreck and slain  
 There is signaled from the victors, we have now avenged the <sup>Maine.</sup>

While there had been wafted to us on the soft  
 Spring breeze the echo of Dewey's fleet in the  
 far away orient of the East, whose magical  
 power and skill had lit up Manila Bay,  
 with American glory, and the sweet strains  
 of Dixie, and the Star Spangled Banner  
 was revibrating on the May morning breeze  
 in the tropics of the Philippines.

Speaking for the blue and the gray, the remnant  
 that has remained to behold the united columns  
 of the North and the South, Let me say that they  
 are broad enough nationally to feel proud of  
 American Citizenship North and South, and not  
 one of them narrow enough politically to lend  
 aid to sectional strife. No fair would have  
 national union and American patriotism  
 influence our Statesmen, our Army, and



our navy, to perpetuate justice and national  
fraternity. To protect our flag, our liberties that  
we prize, and our right that we shall  
maintain. Let the future drama of this great  
republic attract the world before her foot lights  
to view her social, national and commercial  
greatness.

Some of us that marched through Georgia  
and from Atlanta to the sea, have felt  
the influence of the greeting given McKinley  
in the City where the old Georgia melody had  
its origin. And from north to south, from east  
to west a united people have viewed with pride  
our unselfish Executive, who has tenderly  
placed garlands of our republic over the  
Southern dead.

Let the blue and the gray, the dead and the living  
rest sacredly in the affections and memory  
of the united people, for the last remnant will  
have soon marched to James eternal camping  
ground, to rest until the great roll call  
up yonder when the armies of the world  
shall assemble from the cities of the dead  
in that grand review before the great  
Commander.