



RECOLLECTIONS OF SECRETARY STANTON

by

Charles F. Benjamin

a clerk at the War Department

My acquaintance with Secretary Stanton began in the autumn of 1864. He was then in his fiftieth year, but looked older by reason of the abundant tinging of his originally brown hair and beard with iron-gray. He was a short, stout man in figure, awkward in gait, and with a certain unsteadiness in the movement of his arms which, I think, was due to incipient paralysis. His forehead was full without being especially high; his eyes were a soft, dark brown, but were habitually hidden behind glasses; his nostrils were broad and tremulous, and his mouth prominent and firmly set; his dress, while not negligent, was unstudied and ineffective.

Whether speaking or listening, Mr. Stanton looked his visitor full and steadily in the face. He spoke in low, deep, and cold tones, and, even in anger or excitement, scarcely increased or hastened his speech. The effectiveness and flexibility of his voice induces me to believe that in earlier life he had studied and practiced elocution as a preparation for the bar. His movements, too, were always slow and dignified, and in speaking he constantly changed his position and attitude. However these habits were acquired, they had become second nature with him, as he observed them even when momentarily unbalanced by passion.

The glittering of the eyes through the polished glasses; the breadth and quivering of the nostrils; the projecting, compressed lips; the icy, deliberate voice; the slow movement of the body, and the steady, seemingly defiant gaze, gave to the Secretary an air of reserve and haughtiness which made the first approach to him embarrassing. Nothing was more common or more amusing than to see some pompous or arrogant personage ushered into his presence, only to emerge from the room in a state of collapse, crushed by the manner rather than by the words of the lion at bay within.

Many stories have been told concerning Mr. Stanton's alleged sullen and contemptuous reception of communications from his superior officer, the President. All such tales are either grossly exaggerated, or wholly false. Mr. Stanton had a profound respect for authority, which rarely, if ever, failed of outward observance. Furthermore, his legal or political studies had led him to attach a great degree of importance and a considerable share of reverence to the office of President, apart from its incumbent; and this ideal and exalted figure seemed ever present to his imagination, and made frequent appearances in his writings and speeches, though it was hard to identify it with the gaunt, ramshackle presence of Mr. Lincoln, as that presence appeared when its owner was, as an artist would say, in

repose. The President, too, was not a man to endure disrespectful treatment from anybody in legal subordination to him, and was careful of his official dignity even in small matters, as the following incident will show:

When Mr. Stanley, of North Carolina, was appointed Military Governor of his State, the Secretary of War caused to be filled out one of the blank forms used for notifying military nominees of their appointment to office by the President, and when he had signed it and caused the seal of the Department of War to be attached to it, he concluded that it would be well to have the sign-manual of the President affixed to the instrument. He sent the commission to the White House with the request that the President would sign and return it immediately. Mr. Lincoln took the document and read it over carefully, and then began turning and twisting it about, as though in search of something. At last he handed it to the bearer and said, ironically:

“Did Mr. Stanton say where I was to put my signature?”

“No, Sir,” replied the astonished clerk”.

“Can you tell me,” asked the President, “whereabouts on this paper I am to put my signature?” The clerk looked at the commission and saw the ample signature of Mr. Stanton immediately at the foot of the body of the instrument, with the counter-signature of the Adjutant-General to the left. He saw also a neat, snug-looking white space beneath the sign-manual of the Secretary of War which Mr. Lincoln might have occupied to advantage had he seen fit, but the clerk was politic and replied: “I don’t see any place provided for your signature, Mr. President,” and was proceeding to explain how the omission obviously came about when the President interrupted him and said, in a dignified tone: “Take the paper back to the Secretary of War, with my compliments, and say that the President will promptly sign any proper commission that may be sent to him for Governor Stanley, or anybody else.”

The grain of truth in the stories of Mr. Stanton’s rude reception of the President’s missives is probably this - that the bearers of such as related to their own concerns frequently came to the War Department in a state of hysterical elation and hauteur, demanding immediate admission to the Secretary, and, when admitted, waiting with insolent impatience for a submissive word of acquiescence, and losing control of themselves in the course of a colloquy like the following:

“This matter shall receive proper attention, sir.”

“When, Mr. Secretary?”

“I cannot say, now; but you shall be duly advised whenever necessary.”

“But I understood from the President that it was to receive immediate attention.”

“I have received no such understanding, sir.”

“But are not the orders of the President to be obeyed in this department, sir, the same as in other departments of the Government?”

“I decline to discuss the relations of the President and this department with you, sir; you may retire.”

“Very well, Mr. Secretary. I shall go right back to the President and tell him how his positive commands are disregarded here.”

“You may go to the devil, sir! Leave the room!”

More hysterics on the part of the visitor and more fireworks by the Secretary, ending in that animated mummy, “Old Madison,” taking the victim by the arm, leading him into the hallway, standing him up against the wall, and giving him a “real good talking to,” ending with the entirely unnecessary assurance that “Mr. Stanton is a hard man to trifle with.” If the panting stranger showed signs of docility, Madison would extract from him the nature of his business and give him “points” as to the safe and proper mode of following it up; but if he remained sullen or combative, Madison would make some mysterious allusions to the Old Capitol Prison and dismiss him to the White House, or elsewhere.

All the time that I knew him, Mr. Stanton was a passionate man, A word or a gesture would set him aflame in an instant. He would dash the glasses before his eyes far up on his forehead, as though they pained or obstructed his vision; the muscles of his face would become agitated, and his voice would tremble and grow intense, without elevation. But the storm would pass away as quickly as it came, and be succeeded by a calmness of demeanor almost as painful by reason of the sudden contrast. If the victim was a subordinate, further reparation followed. At the next succeeding interview, the white, soft band of the Secretary would be laid in a kindly and seemingly unconscious way upon his shoulder, or the flattering discovery would be made that he was looking ill or worn from overwork and must take a little recreation, or a conventional or seasonable cough would be magnified into an alarming symptom, and directions given for the unconscious invalid to go to the Surgeon-General and be prescribed for by the Secretary's order. If the offended subordinate was of considerable rank, an important piece of news would sometimes be told to him in confidence, or his opinion would be asked on some subject wherein he regarded himself as an expert. General Halleck or General Canby would be placated by the submission to his judgment of some question of public law, or Madison, the aged and garrulous negro who was usually to be found anywhere but at his post at the Secretary's door, might delay a cabinet meeting or a dinner party while retailing to the Secretary the latest piece of gossip which his wife had picked up in her vocation as a nurse, or expounding his confused ideas of what the Government should further do for the "cullud" people. Every undeserved visitation of wrath was sure to be followed by an act of expiation, and the keen perception of the Secretary (who would take notice of so small a matter as the placing of a clean blotting-sheet on his desk), and his unfailing memory (I have often heard him recall apparently trivial things weeks after their occurrence), enabled him with certainty to choose both the time and manner of healing any wound he might have inflicted.

Adjutant-General Townsend, by reason of his position and duties, had to bear in greater measure than any other official the infirmities of Mr. Stanton's uncertain temper. He told me, after the latter's death, how touched he was by finding himself named, in kindly phrase, as one of the executors of his will.

The Secretary's irritability was doubtless due in some part to the state of his health, which had become undermined during his service at the head of the War Department. He suffered greatly, and almost unceasingly, from the asthma, which at last ended his life, and his suffering was aggravated by a serious disorder of the liver. The Surgeon-General attended him daily, and during the fall and winter of 1864 his condition was such as to cause great anxiety. Twice in that period he fell at his post from violent fits of strangulation, I suppose them to have been. But he would not hear of taking a furlough for any period, however short. At the solicitation of the Surgeon-General he would make attempts at exercise by walking, to which he had grown averse; he followed his medical director in matters of diet; he smoked cigars to relieve his asthma and ceased to smoke them when the affection of the liver required; but he would not abandon his inspection of or action upon the multitude of official papers that came before him, nor deny himself to the public or to the officers of his department, nor keep to regular hours of business. He would meet the Surgeon-General's remonstrances and suggestions with the remark, spoken good-naturedly, "Barnes, keep me alive till this rebellion is over, and then I will take a rest!" adding, more seriously, "a long one, perhaps." To Senator Wilson, who expressed to him the fear that they were both wearing out (Wilson, as chairman of the Military Committee, had an unceasing and laborious task), he said, "We are enlisted for the war, and must stand to our guns till the last shot is fired." After the cessation of hostilities his health improved for a time, but he was too far gone for any permanent amendment, and was never himself deceived as to his condition or prospects.

The genuine character of the Secretary's outbursts of anger had much to do with reconciling his associates to them. His rage took note neither of time, place, nor personage, so that all fared alike in chastisement as in atonement. Of course he did not esteem everybody about him in equal measure, but those whom he disliked were very few, and his aversion to them was sincere, even where possibly unjust.

The War Department in those days was a dingy, old-fashioned brick building, with dimensions and interior finish reflecting the severe and economical tastes of Federal officials half a century or more ago. A tawdrily frescoed room and a stick or two of velvet plush furniture kept alive the memory of Mr. Secretary Floyd, whose habits, according to the stories of the older attachés, were sybaritic. Early in the war, a third story had been hastily clapped on to the original structure, and the flues of this addition were so defectively constructed that incessant care was necessary to prevent the department from being burned out. Besides the original and expanded building, the War Department occupied outside buildings enough to constitute a good-sized town in number and extent. The parent building was a hive of industry day and night, those having personal relations with the Secretary always returning after dinner, and double reliefs being worked in some of the routine offices. All day long, from nine to four, a steady stream of people poured into, out of, and through the building, and the door-keeper's daily watch-book showed a long list of names of persons privileged to enter without regard to hours.

The Secretary's room was in a corner of the second story, with an outlook toward the Executive Mansion. It was very plainly fitted up and furnished, the most conspicuous article in it being a large, high table (usually heaped with papers) which Surgeon-General Barnes had recommended as a means of affording the invalid needed exercise while attending to business.

Adjoining and communicating with the Secretary's apartment was one much used by President Lincoln, and furnished with a desk and writing materials for his accommodation. After his death some freshly written sheets were found in his drawer, which read like parts of an intended message to Congress, and dealt with the status in which slavery and the insurgent governments had been left by the collapse of the rebellion. It would seem from these that it had been his purpose, as contended on one side, and denied on the other, during the quarrel between President Johnson and his party, to call Congress together in special session to deal with the question of reconstruction.

In the days of which I write, Mr. Lincoln was a particularly woe-begone figure. It was one of those periods of the war when the whole situation, military, financial, and political, was one of almost unrelieved blackness. He spent hours at a time shut up with Mr. Stanton, all business and speech mainly being put aside, so far as outsiders could judge, while these lonely communions lasted. Was it not the gloomy autumn days of 1864 that the tearful Secretary had in mind when he spoke those pathetic words as he took the hand of the just-expired President: "Ah, dear friend! there is none now to do me justice; none to tell the world of the anxious hours we have spent together!" Even before the autumn had well set in, Mr. Lincoln had begun to enwrap himself in the familiar plaid shawl, and, with his hat pulled well down in front, he would scurry along the halls of the War Department and into the retiring room of the Secretary, noticing and speaking to nobody. At times he would sit in the retiring-room with the door open between that and the apartment in which the Secretary, walking about as was his wont, was transacting business with the departmental officers and clerks, or visitors, prolonging his course, every few minutes, into the adjacent room, to hold converse with his chief. It was an interesting and a pleasant sight, that of Mr. Lincoln seated with one long leg crossed upon the other, his head a little peaked and his face lit up by the animation of talking or listening, while Mr. Stanton would stand sidewise to him, with one hand resting lightly on the high back of the chair in the brief intervals of

that everlasting occupation of wiping his spectacles. But if, while in such proximity, Mr. Lincoln should happen to rise to big feet, farewell to the picturesqueness of the scene, for the striking differences in height and girth at once suggested the two gendarmes in the French comic opera.

Beyond the President's room was the library, converted into a telegraph office, wherein the President used occasionally to unbend himself when the Secretary was beyond earshot and the news from the front was encouraging. Mr. Stanton was a great user of the telegraph, and a fair history of the war might almost be written from the manuscript volumes of telegrams received and sent by him, preserved in the Department. A general officer holding an important command in the Gulf region told me, after the war, that Mr. Stanton's telegrams were so frequent, peremptory, and regardless of hours that he never lay down in his tent or quarters at night without a mental picture of the Secretary of War watching his every movement.

Business at the Department opened at nine in the morning, and the uncertainty as to how soon the Secretary might arrive induced great promptness in attendance. As his carriage turned from Pennsylvania Avenue into Seventeenth street, the door-keeper on watch would put his head inside and cry, in a low, warning tone, "The Secretary!" The word was passed along and around till the whole building was traversed by it, and for a minute or two there was a shuffling of feet and a noise of opening and shutting of doors, as the stragglers and loungers everywhere fled to their stations.

As the carriage drove up to the curb, persons would detach themselves from the straggling group on the sidewalk and gather around the step to intercept the Secretary on his way to the building. Rapidly glancing over the party, he would select those whom he judged to be objects of compassion or urgency and hear and decide for them on the spot. The rest he dismissed, singly or in mass, with a curt injunction to go to his reception-room, upstairs. The favored few were usually soldiers from the hospitals, or wives or mothers of soldiers in attendance upon wounded relatives. "My good woman" was his usual form of address to these latter, but he invariably called an elderly woman, however humble her apparent station, "Madam." In fact, he had the traditional Chinese reverence for the aged of either sex.

As soon as the Secretary had reached his room, he began tugging at the tasseled cord that hung from the ceiling and set in motion a bell hanging in the hallway, so large and clamorous that it was a mystery to me how or why it was put there. Its deviser, however, "builded better than he knew," for the bell became a moral influence. Its tones reached all over the building, and as the active Secretary gave it little rest in the summoning of messengers to be sent hither and thither, it was forever filling the ears and minds of the working staff with lessons of duty and necessity.

Although Mr. Stanton was by nature an accessible man, it was simply impossible for him to give private audience to a tithe of the persons who daily inquired for him. Even Senators and Representatives in Congress often had difficulty in seeing him at the times and in the manner they desired, and frequently accepted "pot-luck" with the crowd in the public reception-room. Colonel Hardie, a handsome Scotch-looking officer, took charge of this room early in the morning and, in the name and by authority of the Secretary, dispatched the business of such as neither needed nor insisted upon the personal action of the Secretary. He also sent in the names of such callers as he thought the Secretary would privately receive and, from time to time, went in himself to take the Secretary's commands upon some case of special difficulty or importance. As nearly as possible to eleven o'clock, the Secretary, who had an almost religious regard for this daily observance, came into the room and took station at the little, high desk, near the bottom, Colonel Hardie or Major Pelouze being in attendance to assist him. He waved everybody back who approached him,

until he had completed a deliberate scrutiny of the company and had received from the officer in attendance a statement, in a low voice, of the exceptionally urgent or meritorious cases. Then, one after another, he indicated those whom he wished to draw near, beginning with the soldiers, and, after them, calling up the plainly dressed women who looked as if they might be soldiers' kinfolk. If he happened to notice that a soldier had crutches or was weak from illness, he would leave the desk and go to him where he was seated. Officers bearing visible tokens of wounds or disability were also preferred suitors, but with other gentlemen of the shoulder-strap he was usually curt. Civilians he treated accordingly as his humor was affected by their statements or manner, but there was always a general observance of the underlying principle that this public reception was for those who had no other means of access to him. It was here that Mr. Stanton might usually be seen at his best. If a case of unusual gallantry, merit, or suffering were stated, he would comment upon it aloud to the company, ending with a moral, inviting to patriotism, virtue, or fortitude. On the other hand, if he found a woman-suppliant embarrassed by the publicity of statement and action, he would draw her beyond the desk to the window-recess and hear her there, or send her to his room to be heard more leisurely or privately. Some of us used to think, while watching the Secretary at these receptions, that a great power had been lost to the pulpit when he became a lawyer; for he was an admirable preacher and far from averse to sermonizing.

Three mornings a week, in continuance of a custom begun before the war, Mr. Stanton, accompanied by a man-servant, visited the City market in the character of caterer for his household. Politics among the stall-holders was of a divided kind, and the Secretary, who knew how each of his purveyors stood, fashioned his gossip with them accordingly. With the Confederate sympathizers he usually assumed a bantering tone, wherein, however, he found opportunity now and then, of enjoining a strict neutrality upon all but their tongues. His playful threats of incarceration in the Old Capitol the garrulous ones were fond of repeating to neighbors and customers, with defiant comments of their own. With the Union marketmen he was more serious, often gratifying them with scraps of hopeful news or prognostications. He was sometimes followed around the market-house, at a respectful distance, by a small crowd of reporters and curbstone speculators in gold, in quest of "points," but his humble confidants were generally as mute as the Sphinx. After the exchange of prisoners was stopped, attempts were made to use some of the market-people to solicit special exchanges for Confederate captives, but Mr. Stanton, making allowance for the pressure exerted, kindly put the solicitations aside and forbade their recurrence. Where a personal or family interest existed, he was ready to hear and sometimes to relieve. The stalls of the disloyal marketmen were veritable depots for underground news from the Confederacy, and it is not unlikely that the astute Secretary occasionally got some "points" of value to himself from the more talkative of these tradesmen.

In 1864 Mr. Stanton ordered that thereafter captured Confederate flags should be accompanied to Washington by the individual or parties engaged in each capture. As soon as informed of the arrival of a collection of such trophies, he organized a little ceremony in the public reception-room. An hour would be appointed for receiving the standards, and he would get together a small company of notables. Taking his stand at the tall desk, each flag would be brought before him in succession, and he would demand the story of its capture, which the captor would give, flag and staff in hand. The Secretary would keep up a running commentary of mingled surprise and gratification; would occasionally stop the narrative and call for a repetition of some part which struck his fancy, and, at the close, would shake the narrator warmly by the hand, introduce him to each of the distinguished persons in the room, and repeatedly tell him that he was a gallant fellow. Sometimes he would shake hands over and over again with the same man, commending the courage of his action and

the modesty of his account of it. Again and again he would refer to their coming from different States, but belonging to one country, and this theme he played upon so variously during each ceremony that he must have had a suspicion of the existence of sectionalism in the armies. When all the flags had been presented and all the stories told, he would turn to the Adjutant-General (who was in attendance and in uniform), and in an impressive voice direct him to make out for each man a furlough for thirty days, with transportation at the public expense to his home and back to his station, and an order on the Paymaster-General for one month's pay in advance; also to cause medals of honor to be prepared and sent to each captor, with due publication of the fact in general orders. Then with more handshakings, compliments, and patriotic allusions, the visitors would withdraw in the company of the Adjutant-General, all blushes, confusion, and delightful anticipation.

At the time I entered the department a gloomy tone pervaded it, which would have been much more noticed and felt by others than the chiefs if incessant and ever-growing routine business had not afforded mental distraction. Not for a day nor an hour did the pressure for army appointments and contracts relax, so that no matter how things went in the field, in the department at Washington they went the same from one day to another. General Halleck at last warned the Secretary of War that the excessive number of paymasters, quartermasters, commissaries, and assistant adjutant-generals appointed to the volunteer forces was an administrative calamity, apart from the useless expense, which was not his concern. The chiefs of bureaus protested that outstanding contracts for the favorite articles of supply ran far ahead of the public necessity. Assistant Secretary Harrington, the practical man of the Treasury Department, came over with schedules and statements which showed that the expenses of the Government were at the rate of one and a half million dollars per day, that the new loans were stagnant, and that the banks were getting alarmed at the extent to which their resources were locked up in the certificates of indebtedness that the Treasury had been obliged to use in settling with public creditors. So far as the War Department was concerned, the trouble lay not in the expense of the troops actually in the field or in garrison, but in the multitude of establishments in the rear, reaching from Maine to California, and sheltering a mixed staff of military and civil employees that rivaled in numbers the men who marched and fought.

In each congressional district a multitude of local interests was bound up with these establishments, and not one could be abolished or reduced without raising a deafening clamor at Washington. It was the supervision and control of these indispensable yet costly auxiliaries that robbed the Secretary of needed repose in the intervals of the great duties of his office; for an appeal was sure to be taken to him from every important act of the local administration. His office was choked with inspection reports, filled with evidences of inefficiency and extravagance, and with projects of reform, and the custodian of them used to have the more important set up in large type in a secluded printing-office, and a single impression struck off, so that the Secretary could read them in his carriage, or in his library or bedroom at home. But all retrenchment had to await the November presidential election, for the Administration took a serious view of General McClellan's prospects, and did not feel strong enough to offend the pettiest political magnate. Mr. Chase had a large following which was not friendly to President Lincoln, and the military situation for the moment gave color to the Democratic declaration that nearly four years of war had failed to restore the Union. Early in October, from some cause that I never fathomed, a subterranean panic seized upon the leaders and lasted a good fortnight at least. The Assistant Secretary of War, who had charge of the internal economy of the department, began dismissing clerks accused of offensive "McClellanism," but this did not meet the Secretary's approval. Doubtless Mr. Stanton knew fairly well the extent to which quiet partisanship for McClellan pervaded his entire department, but politics under him was as free as religion, so long as fidelity and

industry accompanied it. The chief of his military staff, Colonel Hardie, came to him fresh from cordial and confidential service on the staff of the deposed General McClellan, and General Fry, the provost marshal-general, whose duties and powers were more important and delicate than those of any other officer in the department, had been chief of staff to General Buell up to the time when the latter's active career had been terminated by the Secretary.

Early in 1869, a former clerk in his office called upon the ex-Secretary to solicit his influence in the matter of an appointment he was seeking from President Grant. His request was so warmly received that with an awkward honesty of purpose he blurted out, "You know, Mr. Secretary" (his late subordinates usually so addressed him after his retirement), "that I used to belong to the Army of the Potomac, and perhaps I ought to say that I have always been a warm adherent of General McClellan." Mr. Stanton was plainly enough annoyed at the unexpected diversion of the conversation, but he quietly answered, "that is your business, sir, not mine. You served me faithfully, and whenever or where-ever I can serve you, I will do so gladly." Then, seeing the distress and repentance of his visitor, he resumed his interrupted cordiality, and, with a touch of old-time habits, sent him away at ease by having lifted a bit of the curtain that hid the business of state. One of his staff-officers, now dead, told me how the Secretary had "stampeded" him one day during that autumn of 1864, by quietly remarking to him, after an unusual display of petulance, "Never mind, major! when your friend McClellan gets into the White House, you'll be rid of me."

Speaking of his political tolerance, it is proper to remember that Mr. Stanton entered President Lincoln's cabinet as a life-long Democrat, and it was his humor always to regard himself as still a member of the Democratic party. As late as the winter of 1866-67, in the course of a short conversation with the then Senator Hendricks, with whom he maintained cordial relations throughout the war, he rather surprised that gentleman by discussing with him the political situation as though he had a partisan's interest in the forthcoming Democratic nomination to the presidency. He was accustomed to appeal privately to leading Democrats in Congress to forward passively, when they could not actively, the indispensable war measures of the Government; he refrained from gratifying himself or his party friends by patronage; he cherished to the end of his life old political associations and friendships - more than one Democratic worker in Pennsylvania in 1863 and 1864 carried in his pocket an autograph letter from the Secretary of War, guaranteeing any freedom of speech and of the press that did not promote disloyalty or incite resistance to the operations of government; and he never came nearer to confessing himself a convert to the party he was serving than by an occasional lamentation that the war had broken up the party lines and issues as he used to know them.

Mr. Stanton was always and before everything a lawyer. He idealized and deified the Law and magnified, I suspect, both the capabilities and achievements of his class. Eminence as a lawyer was any man's best recommendation to him. He doubtless appreciated in Generals Halleck and Canby the technical military knowledge which he never had nor cared to have, but it was their legal attainments that placed them so high and kept them so steadily in his esteem. It pleased him to have people mention with interest the little tin sign bearing his name and profession which all during his public career remained upon the building opposite the Treasury wherein his law-office had been. While in practice he shrunk from no exercise of power that the public welfare or the public necessity seemed to demand, he was delighted to have that clever and industrious Boston lawyer, Mr. Whiting, find a legal warrant for every proper exercise of authority in the theretofore unexplored and unsuspected war powers of the President under the Constitution. He gave Dr. Lieber a liberal honorarium for preparing those rules for the government of armies in the field which supplied a sound legal basis for what officers and soldiers were doing upon necessity.

“Whiting’s Powers” and “Lieber’s Rules” were jest-books about the department, but their continued vitality and authority prove how sound and timely were the legal instincts of Mr. Stanton in calling them into existence.

One day a prominent Senator made his way into the Secretary’s presence, full of fury against the Quartermaster-General.

“Stanton,” he roared out, “I wonder how a lawyer, as you are, can keep that man Meigs where he is. Why! he pays no regard to either law or justice.”

Mr. Stanton looked at his excited visitor and replied, dryly:

“Now, don’t you say a word against Meigs. He is the most useful man I have about me. True, he isn’t a lawyer, and therefore he does many things that I wouldn’t dare to do.”

“Then why in the name of heaven do you let him do them?” demanded the Senator.

“Somebody has to do them,” quietly answered the Secretary.

Mr. Stanton never reconciled himself to military methods, nor learned to esteem the military profession as a permanent instrument of civilization. Accustomed as a lawyer to do everything in person and in his own way, the delay and precision inseparable from public administration always chafed him. The official conservator of routine in the War Department is the Adjutant-General; and General Townsend, who filled that office during the war, was an even-tempered man, with an ideal respect for authority that never permitted him to palter with orders, and an ideal respect for precedent that never permitted him to depart from tradition in their execution; and of the traditions of the army he was the store-house from which all engaged in military administration at times supplied themselves. The Secretary was greatly attached to his Adjutant-General, scolding him oftener than any other of his subordinates, sharing more confidences with him, and, while forever breaking down his barriers of tradition and routine, constantly taking his opinion in private upon questions or acts under discussion or in contemplation. Mr. Stanton was surrounded and kept himself surrounded by military officers, and despite the incessant war of conflicting habits and methods, there was much mutual esteem. He once humorously described his situation as that of the man betwixt the devil and the deep sea - if he escaped the bottomless pit of chaos, he fell into the fathomless gulf of circumlocution. His open preference for the private soldier to the wearer of shoulder-straps (a preference opposed to both reason and experience and, in his case, free from the usual taint of demagogism) was due to his conception of military force as a necessary evil; still an evil, however necessary. If I might venture to put into phrase his art of war as I have heard him variously expound it, it would read something like this: “Get together all the men you can and move against the enemy; if he retreats, follow him and fight him till he breaks up or surrenders; if he resists, fight him till he retreats.” He once closed a technical and animated discussion, in his presence, of the respective merits of muzzle and breech loading rifles by the remark: “Gentlemen, it’s the man behind the gun that makes all the difference worth talking about.”

Mr. Stanton repeatedly bestowed military appointments upon persons in civil life, charged with civic duties, because the emoluments of such appointments were the readiest means at hand of recognizing faithful or valuable service. Baker, the chief of the military detective service, was, in truth, a faithful and valuable public servant, arid as he held the rank of colonel of volunteers, the Secretary saw no reason why he should not have a brevet promotion, on retiring from the service, just as paymasters, commissaries, and surgeons were having brevets. To his legally constituted mind a brevet brigadier (being an official without either authority, duty, or pay as such) was as great an anomaly as a brevet judge would have been; and hence, after keeping the law, authorizing brevets in abeyance till military pressure became irresistible, he opened the gates, at the close of the war, and said in effect: “Here is something that means nothing and costs nothing; take all you want.” True, he did at first prescribe that brevets should only be conferred on the recommendation

of boards of officers, or, subsequently, of the chain of commanding officers of each aspirant, and he originally limited brevet promotion to one grade for each person breveted; but these methods were too slow and too sparing for the multitude of aspirants, and as he did not care enough about the matter in a public or personal sense to buffet with Congressmen, who naturally wanted everything they could get for their soldier constituents, he practically abandoned the whole business to a clerk in his office, who made up schedules as best he could from which the Adjutant-General prepared the official papers. So loosely was the brevetting done that a party of departmental clerks, for a lark, undertook to get a companion and butt of theirs breveted from his late rank of first-lieutenant to the grade of brigadier-general, and had actually obtained for him the several brevet commissions of captain, major, and lieutenant colonel when he became fearful of detection and exposure, and gave a royal "spread" to his benefactors as the price of their services and silence. I am bound to say that his extraordinary elevation made a man of him, for some wealthy relatives took him up, on bearing of the honors showered upon him, established him in business, and helped him to a desirable marriage, and "the colonel" has been all that a colonel ought to be ever since.

Mr. Stanton's mental characteristics accorded exactly with his past career. He was a self-made man, and had been a highly successful lawyer and advocate. Hence his energy, self-reliance, gravity, and taciturnity. Hence, too, his minute suspiciousness, for he had grappled with extraordinary fabrications of documents and with perjury of the most cunning order in his investigation of the California land-titles. Hence, too, I imagine, his dramatic tendencies, which were perpetually cropping out. Hence, too, his normal aggressiveness; for as Secretary of War he seemed to regard himself as holding a brief for the Government and to be bent on bringing his client out successful, leaving everybody else to look out for himself and to get in the way at his peril. This concentration and intensity of his mind on the single object of crushing the rebellion must explain much of his seeming harshness to and neglect of individuals. He liked many persons and disliked very few. Messrs. Davis, Toombs, Yancey, Thompson, Floyd, and Breckinridge were all, or nearly all, of the leaders of the rebellion that he seemed to have any personal resentment against. He spoke sympathetically of the situation of Governor Vance, who had been captured and brought before him as a prisoner, though he had borne himself stiffly while the governor was present. At the solicitation of Mr. Garrett, he interested himself in getting a special pardon for General Kirby Smith, because of his poverty after conducting large cotton operations for the Confederate Government, and because of Canby's praise of his scrupulous fidelity in executing the surrender of the Trans-Mississippi Department. He permitted an impoverished gentleman who had held civil office at Richmond to bring a valuable law library to the North, and assisted him to an advantageous sale of it. He protected a needy lady who was threatened with dismissal from public employment because her husband was (against her will) serving in the Confederate army. The late judge Roane, of Alabama, told me that when his State seceded he went to Mr. Stanton, who, after some violent language about Yancey and some others, and the ruin they were bringing on innocent men, told him he saw nothing else for him to do but to resign his office at Washington, go home and take care of his family and do as little harm to the Government or his people as he could. When he saw Roane after the war and heard that he had accepted a place in one of the departments at Richmond as a partial means of support, he only remarked, "A man must live." With the exceptions I have named, I do not believe that he had any especial or individual feeling against those engaged in the rebellion, and that he never had any thought or purpose beyond restoring the Union and making it secure. When, in the early days of his heat against the Southern leaders, President Johnson refused to permit General Joseph E. Johnston to visit his sister in Canada without forfeiting his right to remain in the United States, Mr. Stanton,

whose own power of refusal was ample, before handing the paper back to General Grant, who, in company with General Sherman, had recommended the desired extension of General Johnston's parole, indorsed on the paper a minute that the refusal was at the personal order of the President.

The unhappy relations that grew up between Secretary Stanton and General McClellan are, I think, most reasonably to be explained by the overwhelming devotion of the former to the advocate's idea of duty to a client. He entered office on the best of terms with the young General-in-Chief, but they soon drifted apart. The choice of the Peninsular route for the advance on Richmond entirely shattered the Secretary's confidence in his late military ideal, and the retreat to the James River, and the seemingly aimless and endless sojourn there under the protection of the navy, appeared to confirm all of Mr. Stanton's moody anticipations and gave him an ascendancy in the Government that was, however, speedily overturned by the disaster to his own general, Pope. He fought bitterly then, as his cabinet memoranda show, against the restoration of McClellan, but people, generally, had neither his convictions nor his stern courage, and the President overruled him for the moment. He was again overruled in the appointment of General Hooker; but that was the last time, and not even the transcendent influence of General Grant at a later day could suffice to recall General McClellan to the field a second time.

If Mr. Stanton had any marked intellectual tastes dissociated from the law I never discovered or heard of them. He was fond of novels, especially those of Dickens, but he read them, as he said, to relax and clear his mind. He liked also the conversation of accomplished men, and, before the war, had built himself a house, larger than his means warranted, in order that he might assemble them around his table and give them suitable entertainment. Even during the war, no matter how onerous or anxious his duties at the moment might be, he was always ready to meet at his own or some other table men of real eminence in any field who might be visiting Washington. Among his colleagues of the cabinet he maintained intimate relations with Mr. Seward, whose volatile nature had a strong attraction for his own Puritanical soul.

Mr. Stanton was a profoundly pious man and carried his belief in predestination and special providence so far that he might have been a fatalist, except for the teachings of his own active life and the robustness and activity of a mind that was incapable of passiveness. In his eyes the American Union was a providential scheme for working out the happiness of mankind, and therefore, while he never despaired of the republic, the attempt to break it up appeared to him to be sacrilegious, and herein probably lay the secret of his vindictiveness against the men whom he felt warranted in holding guilty of stirring up a rebellion.

With all his religious fervor, Mr. Stanton was a tolerant man in religion, as I have shown him to have been in politics. As the Federal armies penetrated and spread themselves over the South, there was much unavoidable distress and disturbance of the Roman Catholic conventual establishments connected with education and charity, and the sisterhoods, and often priests in charge of congregations, would appeal to the Archbishop of Baltimore for aid in getting their lot in various ways ameliorated by the authorities at Washington. The archbishop would transmit the more urgent and meritorious of these appeals to Colonel Hardie, chief of the military staff at the War Department and a devout Catholic, who would submit them to the Secretary, being unwilling to assume any responsibility himself in matters that touched him so closely. Colonel Hardie has told me how surprised he used to be at the patience and liberality of Mr. Stanton in dealing with these appeals, and how, upon one occasion, when he expressed a fear that he was exposing himself to censure in making himself the repeated vehicle of such applications, the Secretary put him at his ease by replying: "I shall censure you when you fail in your duty of bringing all necessary and proper matters to my attention, - these included."

This is perhaps a good place to refer to a belief that has gained some foothold, that Mr. Stanton was especially concerned in bringing about the conviction or the execution of Mrs. Surratt, and that he afterward was stricken by remorse for his part in her painful death. It is true that, after her conviction, he did refuse to interfere in any way with the execution of her sentence, even when importuned by her pale-faced, weeping daughter again and again, till he was obliged either to yield or to deny admittance to the suppliant; and it is true that, relying upon his own legal training and experience, he personally subjected the witness Weichman, upon whose testimony Mrs. Surratt was chiefly convicted, to a searching examination to test the accuracy and trustworthiness of his statements. Beyond these he had, from beginning to end, no especial relations toward the case of Mrs. Surratt. Doubtless he shared the national repugnance of his countrymen to the hanging of women, and I infer this from his expressed disgust at the applications made to him for passes to witness her execution. After his retirement he was not chary of admitting his mistakes made in office, but he certainly died in ignorance of remorse, or any ground for remorse, on the part of himself or anybody else, in connection with the fate of Mrs. Surratt. It is only fair to say that he did take an active part in the subsequent trial of her son, and made no concealment of his chagrin at the failure of the expected conviction.

I have spoken of Mr. Stanton's self-reliance. The defeat of Rosectans at Chickamauga believed at Washington to imperil East Tennessee, and the Secretary was urgent to send a strong reinforcement there from the Army of the Potomac. General Halleck contended that it was impossible to get an effective reinforcement there in time, and the President, after hearing both sides, accepted the judgment of Halleck. Mr. Stanton then put off the decision till evening, when he and Halleck were to be ready with details to support their conclusions. The Secretary then sent for Colonel McCallum, who was neither a lawyer nor a strategist, but a master of railway science. He showed McCallum how many officers, men, horses, and pieces of artillery, and how much baggage it was proposed to move from the Rapidan to the Tennessee, and asked him to name the shortest time he would undertake to do it in if his life depended on it. McCallum made some rapid calculations, jotted down some projects connected with the move, and named a time within that which Halleck had admitted would be soon enough if it were only possible; this time being conditioned on his being able to control everything that he could reach. The Secretary was delighted, told him he would make him a brigadier-general the day that the last train was safely unloaded, put him on his mettle by telling him of Halleck's assertion that the thing was beyond human power, told him to go and work out final calculations and projects, and to begin preliminary measures, using his name and authority everywhere; and finally instructed him what to do and say when he should send for him by and by to come over to the department. When the conference was resumed and McCallum was introduced, his apparently spontaneous demonstration of how easily and surely the impossible thing could be done convinced the two skeptics, and the movement was ordered and made, and figures now in military science as a grand piece of strategy.

The Secretary was not without a sense of humor, as the following anecdote will show. It was reported to him that an officer from the front was in Washington under an assumed name and rank, in a false uniform and with a forged pass, and had been heard to utter obscure threats against some of the heads of the Government. He had the accused person looked up, arrested, and brought before him, and it happened that he was in the public reception-room when the prisoner arrived. A few stern and searching questions and a demand for the prisoner's papers brought out the facts. The "conspirator" was a lieutenant of volunteers who had overstayed a leave of absence and was masquerading in the uniform and credentials of a field-officer while making ducks and drakes of a few hundred dollars which had come into his possession, and the threats were the frothy parts of a beery discus-

sion with some brother officers over the perennial subject of the merits and demerits of McClellan, Burnside, and Hooker, the shelved commanders of the army to which the inebriates all belonged. The Secretary called in a tall, grisly sergeant of dragoons, whom he was accustomed to use for hard or perilous courier service, and in a sepulchral voice bade him go fetch his saber. At these words the malefactor turned pale and the bystanders were filled with a variety of emotions, ranging from curiosity to terror. The saber was brought and the edge of it solemnly scrutinized and felt by the Secretary. Still holding the saber, he directed the sergeant to tear from the prisoner's coat the gilt buttons and false shoulder straps. Then handing him the naked blade, he said, "Sergeant, take this fellow to the Old Capitol in one of the wagons, and tell Colonel Wood to keep him there till I direct his release. If he attempts to escape, cut him down, by my orders." These dreadful words did not, in truth, mean perpetual or even indefinite imprisonment. The Secretary knew that the case would come before the jail deliverer, judge Advocate Turner, the very next morning, and that, in a day or two, an order of dismissal from the service would result, and the offender be set at large.

The Secretary, however, was not always so grim in his pleasantries. An orderly, lounging at the watchman's desk and scribbling on the blotting-pad, idly scrawled a rude imitation of the Secretary's autograph, and, impelled by some demon of mischief, added a profane and insulting epithet to it. The microscopical eye of the Secretary soon detected the libelous inscription, and the terrified doorkeeper gave up the name of the person whom he rightly suspected of the authorship. "Bad news travels fast," and before the Secretary could reach the station of the culprit, en route to his own room, Smith was on the upper floor of the building, a panting fugitive. For a full week he lived a life of suspense and furtiveness, without a word or a sign from the offended magnate, who was full of business, and might be presumed to have forgotten the matter. But as soon as Mr. Stanton laid his eye upon Smith he invited him into his private room and demanded the whole truth and nothing else. He soon became satisfied that the inscription was nothing but a piece of idle mischief, and a few more questions informed him of the trembler's good record in the field and the department, and of his possession of a wife and children. The Secretary then began to rail at him for so publicly caricaturing his handsome signature, and, for a moment, led the poor fellow to believe that he had a schoolmaster's pride in his up and down strokes; the truth being that while the Secretary was capable, by an effort, of writing a hold and legible back hand, his ordinary chirography was decidedly loose in character.

If I were to attempt, from his conversations, to name types of the kinds of men that Mr. Stanton admired, I should select Governor Morton, Secretary Fessenden, Senator Zachariah Chandler, and General Sheridan. Ruggedness was a characteristic that attracted instead of repelled him, as witness his active friendship for the scarred, cynical, and penniless exile, Gutowski, perhaps the queerest of many queer characters that have made Washington their abiding-place. For Mr. Lincoln the Secretary had an esteem and affection that put their relations entirely apart from those which he formed or maintained with any other man of the period.

Even if President Lincoln had lived, it is improbable that Mr. Stanton would have continued at the War Office long after the return of peace. He did not like administration, and in ordinary times would no doubt have preferred the Attorney-Generalship to any other office in the cabinet. Nor did he like politics, and the little talk there was at one time of his entering the Senate when he could be spared from the War Department never found an echo with him. Doubtless he hoped to find a place in the Supreme Court when he could properly leave the cabinet of his chieftain and friend; and considering his almost fanatical devotion to the law, he ought to have made his mark in the annals of that high tribunal. But his health was so precarious till a period subsequent to Mr. Lincoln's death that he probably thought

little at that time about his earthly future. The length and manner of his continuance in Mr. Johnson's cabinet was of course entirely unpremeditated from one stage to another. I feel warranted in adding that it was against both his wishes and his judgment, and I know that he lived to regret this one conspicuous instance in which he permitted others to decide what his duty was at a great emergency.

When, on the failure of the impeachment of the President, Mr. Stanton abandoned the War Department, he was a beggar not only in health but in fortune; even the one dwelling that he possessed was heavily mortgaged, and so continued till his death brought the true state of his affairs to light, and gave able and willing friends an opportunity to do what they would have been glad to do earlier, except for his own proud silence.

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