

## Chapter VIII.

Rev. William Corby C.S.C.

His Commission with the Irish Brigade -  
 to assist Chaplain in the field - The  
 service - How faithfully the men attended  
 to their spiritual duties - The priest as  
 the soldiers' comfort and <sup>consolation</sup> ~~consolation~~ -  
 Father Corby after the battle of  
 Fredericksburg - ~~The officers' indignation~~  
 The wounded Chaplain - The officers  
 indignation at finding Father Corby  
 in the front <sup>lines</sup> - His failing health -  
 The surgeon sends him to his University in  
 Indiana -

The Irish Brigade, which was almost  
 entirely composed of Catholics, soldiers  
 was indeed fortunate in the good and  
 pious Chaplains who accompanied it  
 during the war. The Rev. Thomas J.  
 Mooney was Chaplain to Crocoran's 69<sup>th</sup>  
 until after the battle of Bull Run, and  
~~the Rev. Corby of the Irish Brigade found in~~  
 the Rev. William Corby a worthy successor to him.  
 We know little of Father Corby's early career,  
 except that he is a native of Michigan,  
 "but as soon as the war broke out,  
 and when a demand was made for  
 Chaplains to accompany the Catholic  
 soldiers to the field, he and several  
 other members of the order volunteered

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of the Holy Cross, Notre Dame, Indiana,  
at once responded to the call.

The parent house at Indiana sent  
forth no less than six of these soldiers  
of the cross to attend the sick and  
wounded and to ~~console~~ <sup>cheer</sup> them by their  
presence and advice, and to console  
their last moments by administering to  
them the ~~best and~~ <sup>best and</sup> sacred rites of their  
~~own~~ <sup>own</sup> holy religion.

Nothing could give the poor soldier greater  
pleasure than to find that the priest, who  
had always been his guide and friend, had  
~~never~~ even volunteered to partake with  
him all the hardships, dangers and  
privations of a soldier's life in time of  
war. It was to him a great consolation  
indeed to hear Mass in the rustic chapel, formed  
of a few tents and green boughs and to  
know that even if he fell, that he would  
be fortified by the Sacraments, and  
~~most likely~~ <sup>most</sup> ~~likely~~ <sup>likely</sup>, receive the final  
absolution from the Minister of God, as his  
spirit winged its flight to stand in judgment  
before its Maker. A Religion of Ceremonies  
and no Sacraments can never make such a  
solemn impression on the mind as the one that  
combines both as the <sup>Roman</sup> Catholic Religion ~~she~~ <sup>she</sup> does. For  
on this account, we too often found in the army,  
that while Catholics were paid respectful respect  
and obedience to their Chaplains, soldiers of  
other denominations, in too many cases, treated

their Chaplains with discourtesy and indifference

their Chaplains with discourtesy or indifference  
 It is not in any sense the writers intention  
 to ~~attempt to depreciate~~ or undervalue the  
 services of the Chaplains of various other  
 denominations, among whom were many  
 truly pious and good men, but it did not  
 tend to improve the morale of the men, nor to  
 impress them with reverence or respect for their  
 Chaplains to find, as was too often the case,  
 49 illiterate men, who professed to have a religious  
 43 calling, stepping from the ranks into all the  
 38 sanctity and dignity of army Chaplains.  
 38 General Butler felt this when he said  
 37 that the Chaplains in the army were a  
 39 nuisance and a pest except the Catholic  
 43 Chaplains, whom he always found attending to  
 50 their duties and ministry to the spiritual and  
 47 temporal wants of the sick, the dying and <sup>the</sup> wounded.  
 54 From a work published in 1864 entitled "Butler's  
 43 1/2 of the South" written by an English officer in  
 the Confederate <sup>Service</sup> Army, we take the following account of  
 the services of the Chaplains, not ~~to expect~~ to expect  
 upon anyone, but simply to show the opinion  
 entertained <sup>Respecting them</sup> by an English Protestant.  
 Speaking of the Chaplains he says

Another class who patriotically rushed to Richmond and obtained salaries to which they were unaccustomed, was a race of long-jawed, loud-mouthed ranters, termed for courtesy's sake ministers of the Gospel. With profound respect for a class "called of heaven" for the administration of holy offices, I may be allowed to observe that, taken as a whole, these long-bodied individuals who were saddled on our regiments simply considered themselves "called" to receive one hundred and twenty dollars per month, with the rank of captain, and the privilege of eating good dinners wherever chance or Providence provided—to be terribly valiant in words, and offensively loquacious upon every topic of life, save men's salvation. Where

they all came from, none knew or cared to know, especially as but little was seen or heard of them, save when some fortunate "mess" had turkey or chickens, and *then*, of course, the minister was sure to put in his appearance, and fuss about until invited to dine. Most of these gentlemen were particularly condescending in their small talk; could wink at "trifles" after a few weeks' residence, and sometimes betrayed alarming proficiency in handling cards at a social game of poker.

The sermons preached to us were decidedly original. On one occasion I was almost petrified to hear one of the most popular of these camp-preachers confess before an audience of a thousand intelligent beings that "it has never yet been positively known whether Christ came down from heaven to save the body or the soul of a man!" I also remember having heard such words of wisdom from the lips of some of these worthies as the following: "It is certain that God is infinite, and therefore He requires some infinite habitation—therefore space is infinite, and was possibly prior to God." Another quietly remarked to his hearers: "Man cannot fulfil the law—all you have to do is to believe, trust to God for and in all things, and as to the rest you may do as you please." Again, another said: "If I disagree with my brother upon points of religion, it is not much matter; he may believe in universal salvation; another denies that Christ was God; one believes in infant baptism, and another does not; but all these little things are not of much consequence, my brethren; all are trying to get to heaven as best they can, and all no doubt will finally reach there—at least, we hope so!"

It is hardly necessary to say that little or no good was effected in the army by these "gospel ministers," (as they termed themselves;) their conduct was not as correct as it might be; and they seemed so eaten up with indolence that they were usually considered as bores and drones. They were seldom or never found administering to the sick or dying; service was offered occasionally; but in time of battle or in the hour of anguish at the hospital, they were looked for in vain. Little, however, could be expected from such a class of men. The majority had received "calls" to retire from blacksmithing or wood-chopping to preach the Gospel, and as they enjoyed but little celebrity or

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remuneration at home, they patriotically offered their services to Government, and were assigned duty among us. The proof of their "divine vocation" is seen in their subsequent conduct, for when Government, in its calmer moments, reduced their salaries, these spiritual heroes for the most part resigned, alleging as reasons that eighty dollars per month and rations was insufficient remuneration (!)

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Nevertheless, truth compels me to add, by way of exception to this general condemnation, that many good and true men were to be found, who, by their upright conduct, self-denial, and zeal, counterbalanced much of the evil here adverted to. Among others who were distinguished for their correct deportment, persevering industry, unaffected piety, restless activity, and sound moral instruction, I would mention the Episcopalians and Roman Catholic priests. The latter, especially, were remarkably zealous; their services were conducted every morning in tents set apart for the purpose; and on Sunday large crowds of the more Southern soldiery were regular in their attendance and devout in their behavior; and I have not unfrequently seen General Beauregard and other officers kneeling with scores of privates at the Holy Communion Table. Such an instance occurred on the morning of Manassas, and I could not help remarking it, as I rode past in the twilight on that eventful occasion.

The Jesuits were perfect soldiers in their demeanor; ever at the head of a column in the advance, ever the last in a retreat; and on the battle-field a black cassock, in a bending posture, would always betray the disciple of Loyola, ministering to the wounded or dying. No hospital could be found wherein was not a pale-faced, meek, and untiring man of this order. Soldierly in their education and bearing, they are ready for any thing—to preach, prescribe for the sick, or offer a wise suggestion on military or social affairs. It is to the foresight and judgment of one of them that Beauregard and Johnston escaped death or capture at Manassas; for had they not met one of these missionaries during the heat of the conflict, and heeded his modest advice, one or other of these calamities must have inevitably ensued.

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While the Irish Brigade lay encamped around Washington, previous to the Peninsula Campaign, the duties of the Chaplains were pleasant enough, and consisted merely in saying Celebrating Mass, hearing Confessions and writing letters, for such of the men as were unable to write themselves, to their families.

The Chaplain was kept busy enough when the paymaster came round, for <sup>they become</sup> he ~~was~~ the soldiers adviser and banker they consulted with <sup>him</sup> as to how much of their pay they should send home, and in all cases ~~he~~ strictly followed the priest's advice. Being entrusted with remittances to the amount of several thousand dollars, the Chaplain proceeded to Washington to forward it according to instructions.

It is a fact that during the war hundreds of thousands of dollars were entrusted to the ~~the~~ <sup>Catholic</sup> Chaplains for remittance, and yet we believe there is not a single instance on record where a single dollar of all this was either misappropriated or lost.

The Irish Brigade spent its first Christmas day in Camp California near Alexandria. <sup>the Officers and men</sup> though they enjoyed the holidays in as jovial and festive a manner as if they were in New York, they did not forget

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their religious duties, and commenced the days Celebrations by attending the Midnight Mass in camp. It may strike our readers as absurd to have a ~~Kej~~ up this solemn Ceremony of the Catholic Church ~~partaken~~ in the tented field where there was no ~~but~~ stately temples nor Cathedral dome to cover the pious worshippers.

But had they seen the rustic chapel that the piety of the Irish soldiers raised to the worship of God, they would change their opinion. The Chapel was a really picturesque structure in itself. A dense cluster of pine and cedar trees was selected for the site. ~~The center~~ of the ~~the~~ <sup>brush</sup> trees in the center ~~was~~ cleared away for the body of the house, ~~with a~~ <sup>many</sup> ~~part~~ of the large trees were left standing, so that their thick foliage would answer as a roof and ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> ~~each~~ <sup>to</sup> their trunks as pillars ~~in~~ <sup>which</sup> to support the huge branches that were piled overhead for a ~~body~~ <sup>covering</sup>. A Stockade of cedars formed the sides of the house, while a large tent at the end answered for altar and priest.

Such was our Chapel and though not a stately or grand one, there was something more solemnly simple and imposing in that Midnight Mass Celebrated under

the shade of those old forest trees, than  
 if it were the stately edifice ever  
 raised by the hands of man to the  
 worship of God. The Mass was  
 celebrated by the three Chaplains of  
 the Brigade, namely Fathers Tobey, Willett  
 and Dillon, and as their voices rose in  
 psalmody and hymn, and as the prostrate  
 worshippers humbly bowed their heads  
 in response and uttered their silent  
 prayers, there was something peculiarly grand  
 in the ceremony. The glare of the  
 candles suspended <sup>from</sup> the trees, the flickering  
 feeble light barely making the gloom  
 of the night visible, the sigh of the wind  
 and the gentle pattering of the falling snow  
 and sleet, ~~combined with~~ the murmured  
 priests, the soft tinkling of the bell,  
 and the low responses of the attendants  
 and prostrate pious worshippers, all combined  
 to add a solemn sanctity to the celebration  
 that we have never experienced inside  
 the walls of the most stately edifice.  
 It reminded us of stories we had read  
 about the white robed Druids who collected  
 their followers to join in midnight worship  
 under the ~~shades~~ shade of some mighty  
 oak trees.



of real service in the tilled field was  
 in the Spring of 1862 when, after General  
 McClellan taking <sup>Command</sup> of the army of the  
 Potomac, a Reconnaissance took place  
 towards Centerville and Manassas in order  
 to develop the enemies strength and  
 position. The enemy fell back across  
 the Rappahannock so that no engagement  
 more serious than <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup>  
 place. During this movement the  
 Chaplains of the brigade, in a very  
 impressive ~~ceremony~~ <sup>ceremony</sup> ~~dedicated~~ <sup>dedicated</sup> placed  
 their regiments under the special protection  
 of ~~Saint Patrick~~ the Blessed Virgin and  
 Saint Patrick.

The Brigade took a prominent part  
 in the Peninsula Campaign - in its fighting  
 as well as in all the hardships of the  
 marches by night and day, and in the  
 horrors of the retreat from before Richmond.  
 While the army lay in front of Yorktown  
 the Brigade had provided itself with  
 comfortable quarters and the men made  
 an effort to celebrate May day, according  
 to the ~~ancient~~ <sup>Catholic</sup> custom, by decorating  
 their public Chapel in the most gorgeous  
 manner with the wild flowers that ~~had~~  
 grew in such luxuriance, ever at

Father Dillon read the beautiful gospel from Saint Luke, giving an account of the journeying of Mary and Joseph, and the birth of the infant Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem; after which he delivered a short and telling address to his hearers, who, at the conclusion of the ceremony quietly retired to their tents.

Such was Christmas morning, 1861, in the camp of the Irish Brigade, and thus did these fearless soldiers of the sword bow in pious submission to the teaching of the cross, and no honor of this holy festival, which is laden with the richest freight of human blessings and happy recollections.

This first Christmas day in camp was spent pleasantly enough. The men and officers crowded into hospital-like tents, the materials for toasting at Old friends and loved ones, absent but not forgotten, were plenty, and in song and jest and story "Muldareeny" was not forgotten, and the day and night were spent as happy and as merrily as they possibly could be under such circumstances.

The Irish Brigade formed a portion of the <sup>Army Corps</sup> ~~Corps~~ ~~d'armee~~ commanded by General Sumner, an accomplished veteran of more than forty years military experience. Their first experience

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that early period, and by attending divine service. The Chaplains were kept busy for the Confessional was crowded by pious worshippers - men, who felt that for many of them this would be their last Confession, for all the symptoms indicated that a bloody and fierce Campaign was inaugurated.

The few days left the men enjoyed here were spent to good advantage - making their peace with God - writing letters and sending little souvenirs to loved ones at home, whom they may never see again.

While the brigade was encamped on Tyler's farm the officers got up a race, which came off on the 31<sup>st</sup> of May, just the day on which the battle of Fair Oaks commenced. The amusement was broken up by an order to march in quick time for the battle field. As the conflict was a fierce one, and as the brigade suffered severely in it, the Chaplains soon found their hands full, and all their time was taken up in administering the rights of the Church to the sick and wounded, and oftentimes too, in acting the good Samaritan in attending to the temporal wants of some poor fellow

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While the brigade was lying in front of Richmond <sup>it was</sup> ~~they were~~ <sup>honored</sup> ~~complimented~~ by a visit from General Poin and also by being specially complimented by General M<sup>r</sup>: Clellan for ~~his~~ <sup>his</sup> conduct at the battle of Fair Forks.

After the battle of Gaines' Mill, in which the brigade gallantly participated, the army commenced to retreat toward Malvern Hill. This retreat was attended with all the worst horrors of war. The dying and wounded were neglected and deserted abandoned. Brave men seemed to have lost all sympathy for their fellow creatures and ~~seemed~~ to be solely absorbed <sup>in</sup> by their trying to secure their own safety. Perhaps, the doctors and Catholic Chaplains were the only persons who did not forget their missions of <sup>charity</sup> ~~goodness~~; peace and love. Many of them refused to leave the sick and wounded but remained with them until captured by the enemy. We have seen the Chaplains <sup>take up</sup> ~~with~~ some poor wounded fellows, who had been abandoned, ~~taken up~~ <sup>take up</sup> behind them on their horses.

When the army commenced falling back to the James River over the thousand wounded men were at Savage Station,

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and when these poor fellows found that they were to be abandoned to their fate, I had a terrible effect on them. Some of them, pale and emaciated, rose from their beds and huddled on benches after the retreating troops - poor fellows! they soon fell faint and were carried by the way side. But most of them were kindly cared for by the enemy. The sight of that long line of ambulances crowded with wounded men and of these ghostly looking creatures hobbling after them was heart-rending in the extreme.

The brigade suffered severely at Savage Station, ~~where battles were fought~~

and White Oak, but it lost more men and officers at the battle of Malvern Hill than during the other seven days fighting <sup>together</sup> ~~and together~~.

The sick and wounded were so numerous here that the chaplains found little time for recreation or even to take the necessary sleep or refreshments.

Fathers Sully and Willet, who had remained to cheer and console the abandoned sick and wounded at Savage Station, until captured by the Confederates were kindly treated by the latter and

were allowed to return to their commands  
while encamped at Malvern Hill

While among the Confederates an officer remarked  
to Father Scully, not knowing who he was,  
"What a fine lot of Yanks we have got to day!"  
So finding out his mistake he at once  
apologized in the most polite manner.

While the troops lay encamped at Malvern  
Hill, previous to their evacuation of the  
Peninsula, the men of the Irish Brigade,  
with their usual attention to religious matters,  
constructed a cosy rustic Chapel in which  
Mass was daily celebrated and to which  
which the men from several other commands  
continually flocked. The paymaster too had  
come round, and the survivors of the campaign  
kept the chaplains busy writing money  
to their friends, and also in writing to the  
families of those killed in battle.  
Between their duties of celebrating Mass,  
hearing confessions, visiting the sick  
and wounded, and writing letters to their  
friends the chaplains were kept busy  
and had very little time to themselves.  
Even, many of the men who could write  
themselves would not be so satisfied unless  
the priest wrote for, they would say.

"Sure, your reverence they will thank

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"a good deal more of the letter at home if you'd write it!"

There was no writing this and the kind good natured guest would sit down and write it for him.

While the brigade was encamped at Malvern Hill General Meagher returned to New York to recruit its ranks.

After the evacuation of the Peninsula, the brigade was sent to support General Pope whose army <sup>of the Virginia</sup> was threatened with wholesale destruction by Lee and Jackson.

The brigade was hastily ~~conducted~~ <sup>marched</sup> about from place to place; its irregular and uncertain were the movements of Pope's demoralized army that no sooner did it reach Fairfax Creek, than it was sent to Fredericksburg, thence to Alexandria, thence to Fairfax and Bull Run.

Things looked as if the movement was altogether without a head, and the troops completely demoralized.

All this time our chaplains were kept continually on the march, and when the troops halted at night, instead of being allowed to snatch a few hurried hours of repose, they had to listen hear the confessions of some scrupulous poor fellows, who did not wish to go into battle the following day.



with their conscience burdened even with  
the most trivial sins

When Washington was threatened and McClellan  
restored to command, the advance of the army  
to meet Lee, who was marching into Maryland  
and Pennsylvania, was rapid, so that  
the Chaplains had just as hard a time of  
it as any other officer or soldier.

The Brigade suffered fearfully at Antietam,  
and the duties of the Chaplains of its various  
Regiments were proportionally severe.

After the retreat of Lee the brigade was  
encamped on Bolivar Heights. The country  
around was beautiful. The camp itself had a  
most lovely and picturesque appearance.  
Here the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers  
formed a junction, while in front extended  
a panoramic view of surpassing grandeur.

The Blue Ridge Mountains rose in <sup>front</sup> ~~the distance~~  
in all their majestic grandeur, while in the  
distance extended the rich Shenandoah valley.

The garden of Virginia

In this lovely region, surrounded by all that  
could delight the imagination - a delightful  
country with unrivalled scenery, a sky of  
Italian blue - the men soon forgot all  
their losses and hardships and began to  
enjoy themselves only as Irishmen know how.

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The battle of Fredericksburg was perhaps, the most disastrous one of the war to the soldiers of the Irish Brigade, and at the same time the most glorious for their military valor and prowess.

The mad charge on Mary's Heights was never surpassed in fierce bravery and reckless daring nor in the wholesale slaughter of the assailants. Fully two thirds of the officers and men of the Irish Brigade lay dead or dying on that bloody field on that cold winter night. The cold snow of December fell silently over the battle field.

Thousands lay along the valley and hill side extending from the town, to the enemies' entrenchments, whose wounding wounds were frozen and whose limbs were stiffening by the heavy frost.

Masses of dead and dying were huddled together, some convulsed in the last death agonies, others - delirious - writhing in torture, gasping for water - tried to shelter themselves behind the dead bodies of their comrades.

Cries, groans and shrieks arose from that battle field like the fearful wails of lost souls. No one could or dare leave them, for the enemy ruthlessly continued to sweep that field with artillery, long after all opposition had ceased.

Some of the Catholic Chaplains ventured

forth armed only with their flasks upon their backs, and canteens of whiskey and water. They had to move cautiously and display few lights, so as not to attract the attention of the enemy. In this way they shared many a poor penitent's ease in the solemn silence of the night and cooled their parched lips.

But their mission was not without its danger for we were informed that while so engaged Father Corby received two bullets through his clothes from the fire of the enemy, while another Catholic Chaplain received an ugly wound from a ~~woodward~~ <sup>young</sup> ~~man~~ <sup>soldier</sup>, who mistaking him for one of those ghoul's who prowl over battle fields to rob the dead, fired at him.

After the battle of Fredericksburg the brigade fell back encamped near Falmouth, where it remained for the winter. Here the men erected a pretty rustic chapel, where they attended ~~mass~~ <sup>service</sup> and where the Chaplains celebrated mass, heard confessions, and attended to the general needs of the men of their regiments. I recollect often seeing, at early morning, a crowd of men outside the priest's tent waiting to go to confession, and in the afternoon another crowd, some sending home money to their friends, others writing to have him "just write a letter home."

In May 1863 the battle of Chancellorsville

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was fought and the brigade, as usual, took a prominent part in it. Nothing of unusual interest took place. A little incident through rumors which gave a good idea of the dangers incurred by the Catholic Chaplains.

An officer going into battle gave his nurse to Father Corby to keep it safe for him. While engaged at the front he met the priest at the front preparing a dying man. The officer halted, looked at the Chaplain and exclaimed "Father Corby what brings you here?"

"My duty, Captain!"

"Well, Father, hand out my nurse, it is safer with <sup>me</sup> than with you!"

~~At~~ <sup>about</sup> this time General Meagher left the brigade. At Gettysburg it took an active part in the fierce assault made by the Second Corps.

Before going into that desperate conflict the remnant of the brigade <sup>eventually</sup> ~~gradually~~ fell down while Father Corby piously raised his hands over them and bestowed his benediction upon them.

The scene was solemn and impressive and forcibly impressed the other command with the quality of the Irish Catholic Soldier.

In January 1864 the brigade returned to New York to be recruited. Father Colby accompanied his regiment, the light- eight, and while the regiment was recruiting he paid a visit to the University at Notre Dame, where he was joyfully received. We next find the Irish Brigade partly recruited, serving under General Grant in the Wilderness and Spottsylvania, where they suffered severely. The Corcoran Legion also suffered heavy casualties in the above engagements. It is needless to follow the brigade through the various battles in which it participated. The Chaplains were kept busy all the time attending to the sick and wounded and preparing them for death. Father Colby scarcely got any rest during the restless movements of the army. In fact, so zealous was he in the discharge of his duties and in his attendance, that his health rapidly failed and he was compelled to resign, which he did in the month of September 1864 to the great sorrow and regret of the remnant of the Irish Brigade. He returned to his Monastery in Indiana, and is at present Superior of the Mission House at Watertown, Wisconsin.

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