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Chapter XII.Rev. Thomas Willitt S. J.Chaplain 69<sup>th</sup> N. Y. Vol.

This is shown by the officers and men - How he  
 cheered the men on board the transports - How  
 at Alexandria, Va. - Pleasantly of the scene -  
 His words against gambling, cursing and  
~~drinking~~ drinking - Sending the soldiers  
 money home - Father Willitt in the field - Raising  
 the men before battle - His services under Foster  
 to high commendation - His return to the 69<sup>th</sup> - His zeal and  
 services - From the army at the close of the war.

When the 69<sup>th</sup> N. Y. Vol., the pioneer regiment of the now  
 celebrated Irish Brigade, left New York for the City of Washington  
 on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 1861 it consisted not only of a  
 full complement of picked men, but was officered by  
 soldiers of many of whom had already seen service in this  
 country and Europe, and all, Field, Staff and Line  
 possessing the unlimited confidence of the men to whom they  
 were destined to govern and lead through many stormy  
 scenes of warfare and hardship. Of these latter one of  
 the most reliable though at the time least conspicuous,  
 was the Rev<sup>d</sup> Thomas Willitt, (called in his own language  
 Anall etto) the Chaplain. He was a native of Lower Canada  
 of French descent and speech, and his small wiry phys-  
 ical, quick, brilliant eye  
 and strong at once great physical endurance and  
 perpetual watchfulness, bespoke equally his Norman descent  
 and his capacity to perform the arduous <sup>duties</sup> imposed on him by  
 his calling and by the stern rules of the illustrious Order which  
 claimed him as a member. Modest in dress and demeanor,  
 courteous, even winning in speech yet unflinching in the  
 performance of the sacred duties of his office, he easily won,  
 even from the commencement of his connection with the 69<sup>th</sup>,  
 the love and respect of all classes.

His entire control over the men of the Regiment was first  
 conspicuous on the occasion of their departure from New  
 York in the steam boat for Perth Amboy, when filled with  
 the reports natural to men leaving families and homes to meet  
 many and uncertain dangers, they gave way for the time  
 to all <sup>the</sup> impulses of their varied natures, recklessness, grief, sim-



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related hilarity, and in a few cases, very few indeed, to profanity. It was then seen how salutary an effect can be produced by the presence of a Catholic priest on a large mass of men. <sup>He</sup> Moved ~~regard~~ to excitement as to <sup>be</sup> almost beyond the control of their officers. All night long on the deck of the Government transport, flitting to and fro might be seen the small white form of the Chaplain, and his voice he heard, reproving in low but emphatic accents the unreasonably boisterous or consoling in tender words those whose softer nature had overruled them for the moment. So efficient, indeed was his ministrations during this their first trial that when the morning sun dawned on the regiment as it marched through the streets of Philadelphia, a more steady, contented and even cheerful body of men could not have been seen under any circumstances, in any portion of the continent.

The 69<sup>th</sup> proceeded, via Baltimore, to the national Capital and encamped at Meade's Hill for some days, where a temporary chapel was quickly constructed and the following Sunday the Divine Sacrifice of the Mass was attended by the Regiment and a large number of officers and men from the neighboring camps. On the last day of November the Regiment was moved to the front and crossing the Long Bridge, bivouacked for the night near Alexandria, Va. The night was cold and stormy, but the morning, Sunday, broke with all the glorious radiance of a Southern autumn. The field in which the men had counted sleep was quickly alive with groups of soldiers hastily preparing breakfast or adjusting their accoutrements previous to marching, when just as the sun's rays brightened Fort Elsworth, the silvery voice of a little bell was heard to resound in the clear air, and laying aside all occupation the soldiers hastened obediently to a particular part of the field, where but a few minutes

before had sprung up as if by magic, a simple mud tent, containing an Altar, Tabernacle and lighted candles. Here also was Father Willett robed in appropriate vestments prepared to celebrate his first mass in Virginia, in the presence of the uncovered troops who knelt silently on the damp ground of a State which was destined to prove the last resting place of too many of their number. Few who were present on that occasion will forget the solemnity of the scene, intensified as it was by a general sense of dangers and perhaps sudden death before them, soon was there one of that armed host that did not eagerly and deeply drink in the words of warning, hope and encouragement which for more than an hour flowed from the good Father's lips. The persons were softened, and the dejected comforted and all resumed their military labors with better feelings.

Benj soon joined by the other regiments of the Brigade, <sup>the 69th</sup> remained in Camp California, four miles from Alexandria until April of the following year, with the exception of a short time spent in the neighborhood of Manassas, and Washington Junction previous to its departure for the Peninsula. While thus in winter quarters a rude but spacious Canvas Church was constructed, which was crowded every Sunday by worshippers, a large percentage of whom were usually communicants, for the Chaplain was not content with his ordinary duties <sup>at</sup> the Altar but devoted his evenings to hearing confessions and personally visiting the quarters of the men, indeed his zeal <sup>was untiring</sup> knew no bounds for day and night he might be found among the tents, comforting the sick relieving tribulation and occasionally joining in the pleasant conversation of the Camp fire groups. Gambling and profanity - the two besetting sins of the soldier, - though generally discouraged in the Irish Brigade, were not unknown, and again,

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them as well as in the person, the heaviness of his eloquence and logic was directed, with an efficiency that even almost irradiated their eyes from the Camp of the 69<sup>th</sup>. During the time also the regiment received its first inklings of pay and by the assistance and under the direction of the Chaplain thousands of dollars were sent home to wives and children, that otherwise would have been squandered at the gaming table or what was nearly as bad <sup>in</sup> the bottles' content. In fact throughout the whole time of his connection with the Army Father Millett paid special attention and devoted much of his time to the transmission of the hard earned wages of the two hundred soldiers, not a dollar of which failed to reach its proper destination, and to his unflinching efforts many a household in New York and elsewhere were indebted for those periodical supplies of money, which if they did not compensate for the absence of the beloved father or husband, lightened their sorrows and showed that amid the din of battles, home and its comforts were not forgotten.

Father Millett accompanied his regiment in all its battles from Yorktown to Antietam, with the same religious <sup>firm</sup> ~~firm~~ <sup>from which</sup> ~~firm~~ <sup>firmness</sup> which at first distinguished him. His powers of enduring the fatigues of the march and the knowings, the ravages of hunger and the inclemency of a climate powerfully destructive of animal life, were such as very frequently to <sup>elicit</sup> ~~excite~~ the astonishment and the envy of the most robust soldier, while his disregard of personal danger on the battle field, often excited the apprehension of his devoted flock for his safety. In anticipation of each recurring engagement, it was his custom to bend every energy of his mind to prepare by Confession and Communion the soldiers under his spiritual command to face the coming danger, and then when the hour of actual combat had arrived, and a very few moments might see them in Eternity the good soldier of the cross.

understanding the bullets that fell around him with a solemnity face through the kneeling ranks and administer to the portulants a conditional absolution. This done he took up his position as near the scene of action as the rules of the service would permit ready to administer the last rites of the Church to the wounded and dying as they were born from the field. But his labors did not even end here. The field Hospital with its thousands of maimed and ~~groaning~~ <sup>groaning</sup> victims was his next <sup>sphere</sup> ~~scene~~ of action, and it is well attested that <sup>on</sup> many occasions after a great battle, he would spend days and nights continuously among the wounded without food or rest, assisting the surgeons and nursing the sufferers, very often administering medicine and washing their ears with his own hands.

Death and disease having reduced the Irish Brigade to a mere handful, and there being two other Chaplains attached to it, Father Willet, in the winter of 1862-3, left the 69<sup>th</sup> with the great regrets and good wishes ~~of~~ not only of his own Regiment, but of every officer and man in the entire Division - for he was known to ~~the~~ all - and departed for North Carolina to be attached to General Foster's command.

Some years after wards, an <sup>member</sup> ~~officer~~ of the 69<sup>th</sup> happening to be in Washington in conversation with an officer, a Protestant, who had held a high rank in the Army, <sup>and particularly Father Willet</sup> enquiries were being made for the old friends, when the General turning to a group of <sup>other officers</sup> ~~friends~~ said, "In fact Gentlemen the only real Chaplains we had in the Army were Catholic priests and the Rev. Mr. Willet was the best I ever saw."

Father Willet remained several months in the South, still laboring indefatigably among all classes, military, naval and civil, and being the only priest in that vast department at the time, he had sometimes to travel sixty miles to say Mass for some isolated group of poor Catholics. His health beginning to give way he was ordered back to New York where he remained <sup>and may</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>supervise</sup> of his functions at St Francis Xavier

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College in 16<sup>th</sup> Street. Meanwhile the 69<sup>th</sup>, at length reduced to about a hundred effective men, was sent home on recruiting service and was reorganized by the addition of eight new companies under the command of some of the most efficient officers of the old Brigade who had previously been honorably mustered out of service for want of commands. These gentlemen surrounded by the enlisted men were naturally anxious to have a Chaplain return with them to the front and of course preferred Father Willet whose earlier services in the past were the subject of general admiration. At their unanimous request <sup>then at the head of the regiment</sup> Lt. Col. McGee applied to the Superior of the Recruits in New York to have their old Chaplain restored to the unit. That distinguished ecclesiastic replied by favorably but left the choice of going or remaining in the more tranquil scenes of cloister life <sup>to the Rev. Father himself.</sup> Through long familiar with the dangers and hardships of camp life the zealous Father did not hesitate a moment in his choice. He could not withstand the entreaties of the <sup>men</sup> of that flock so endeared to him by many ties of affection and common suffering, and the regiment feeling assured his ministrations returned to the battle field with renewed ardor.

Before their departure however the returned veterans were to receive a bounty bounty of three hundred dollars each, and Father Willet entered on his duties by providing himself with paper <sup>and</sup> envelopes, and might be seen each successive day in the paymaster's office hard at work writing and directing letters for the men, in which were included to their relatives <sup>a new</sup> large <sup>proportion</sup> <sup>of the</sup> in some cases the entire <sup>of the</sup> bounty money. Considering the temptations to spend money recklessly presented by a large city like New York to men recently returned <sup>after</sup> years of active service, the results of his presence and advice in this case ~~are~~ hardly be overestimated, and it is a fact highly honorable to the veterans and their officers that within four hours after the issuance of

the order for their departure, and though scattered in New York and the Cities in the vicinity, they were promptly at the place of rendezvous ready for embarkation, every <sup>man</sup> answering the roll call, and not one showing signs of the least dissipation, so much to <sup>be</sup> ascribed to his former residence in the Metropolis.

The devoted Chaplain, of course, accompanied the regiment on its return and remained with it till the close of the war. His second term of service presented the same succession of unceasing labor as the first. His arduous in the cause of religion threw no burden. Finding that tracts, newspapers and the publication of a deleterious character were being circulated among the men by sectarian organizations, he wrote to friends in New York for a supply of Catholic books to edify the soldier in his hours of leisure on the field or console him in his sick bed in hospital. The request was quickly complied with and books, scapulars, rosaries and novenas in great quantities were forwarded to him by many pious men and women who had never enjoyed the pleasure of his acquaintance.

The war over, the worthy servant of the God quietly returned to his original sphere of usefulness and to the companionship of the members of that Order which though justly proud of the long list of its distinguished children, <sup>threw</sup> none can count among them many men excelling, at least in zeal and devotedness, than the subject of this sketch. And it was not alone for his regiment or for the Catholic soldiers of the army that he labored and preached.

The example of his immediate congregation assembled every Sunday before the main altar, and his own <sup>sermons</sup> ~~sermons~~ which were replete with sound maxims and delivered in plain and touching language, first <sup>excited</sup> ~~attracted~~ the curiosity of soldiers of other denominations, <sup>who, being</sup> ~~and then~~ in remote parts of the country seldom saw a priest and never <sup>perhaps</sup> were within a Catholic Church; the curiosity was generally

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followed by respectful attendance, many conversions was the result and those who did not have that good fortune found their early Anti-Catholic prejudices corrected and their asperities softened in their intercourse with their Catholic Comrades,

Though we have not had the happiness of meeting Father Willesh <sup>of late</sup> ~~for some~~ years we are glad to learn that he is still in good health and laboring with his wonted assiduity and single <sup>ness</sup> ~~ness~~ of purpose; and ~~God~~ the wishes of the ever-loving soldiers to whom he administered in the hour of peril and suffering, and the prayers of the widows and orphans, for whom comfort and well being he was ever so solicitous are of avail, he will yet live a long life of usefulness and his death shall be <sup>like</sup> that of the Just.