

SANITARY COMMISSION.

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*Letter of the President to the Executive Committee of the
Central Financial Committee, in New York.*

NEW YORK, July 9th, 1861.

TO HON. SAMUEL B. RUGGLES, CHRISTOPHER R. ROBERT, ROBERT
B. MINTURN, GEORGE OPDYKE, JONATHAN STURGES, MORRIS
KETCHUM, WILLIAM A. BOOTH, DAVID HOADLEY, J. P. GIRAUD
FOSTER, and CHARLES E. STRONG,

Members of the Executive Committee
of the Central Financial Committee
of the U. S. Sanitary Commission :

Gentlemen,—On returning from a tour of inspection of our troops in the West, I hear with the liveliest satisfaction that the thoughtful, business men of New York, associated with other patriotic individuals throughout the country, have taken in hand the pecuniary interests of “The Sanitary Commission,” and are devising ways and means of supplying it with money, the true and only means of strength and efficiency. Could I transfer to your hearts and minds the rich experience of the last fortnight passed in the camps of the West, you would need nothing further to animate you to the most earnest, immediate and unwearied efforts, to provide our Commission with money—the only thing it now lacks to give it a benignant power to diminish and control the malignant influences that hang darkly round our troops, and threaten to make out of the most precious portion of our whole population another “noble Army of Martyrs!” Money! money! promptly and liberally expended

in supplying our officers and men with the instructions, the warnings and the aids, which their inexperienced and unfurnished condition demands, and which only an association like our own—of an extraordinary character, unhampered by routine and with special rights and privileges granted by the government, with express reference to the exigencies of this exceptional case—can hope to impart, with promptness enough to secure the end.

Money is the indispensable condition of our success, and the only one now wanting.

Consider the prospects of 250,000 troops, chiefly volunteers, gathered not only from the out-door, but still more from the in-door occupations of life : farmers, clerks, students, mechanics, lawyers, doctors, accustomed, for the most part, to regularity of life, and those comforts of home which, above any recorded experience, bless our own prosperous land and benignant institutions ; consider those men, used to the tender providence of mothers, wives and sisters, to varied and well prepared food, separate and commodious homes, moderate toil, to careful medical supervision in all their ailments—consider these men, many of them not yet hardened into the bone of rugged manhood, suddenly precipitated by unexpected events into the field of war, at the very season of the greatest heat, transferred to climates to which they are unwonted, driven to the use of food and water to which they are not accustomed, living in crowded barracks and tents, sleeping on the bare earth, broken of rest, called on to bear arms six and eight hours a day, to make rapid marches over rough roads in July and August, wearing their thick uniforms and carrying heavy knapsacks on their backs—and what can be looked for, but men falling by the dozen in the ranks from sheer exhaustion, hundreds prostrated with relaxing disorders, and finally, thousands suddenly swept off by camp diseases, the result of irregu-

larity of life, exposure, filth, heat, and inability to take care of themselves under such novel conditions. If you add the reflection that the brave and worthy officers who command these men, are, from the very nature of the case, wholly inexperienced in camp-life, that they are usually no more than the social equals of those they are set over, that the excellent and devoted medical men selected to watch over our volunteers are equally unaccustomed to the field and to the military hospital, that their commissaries and quarter masters have been summoned from civil life, and that our whole military array, with so small an exception as not to be worth noting, is the product of a rare necessity, extemporised almost as miraculously as the armed men that sprang from the teeth that Cadmus sowed, you will at once feel how inevitable must be the defects, the friction, the mistakes, the delays, the dreadful consequences to health and life attending the very collection and existence of such a body of troops, so officered and so provided for.

Can anything but the energetic interposition of a body of persons devoting themselves to the special work of furnishing condensed experience to officers and men, diligently attending the camps, bringing instantly to head quarters the warnings of scientific and practical instruction, relieving surgeons, commissaries and quarter-masters of their embarrassing want of knowledge how, in the shortest manner, to relieve their official necessities, establishing a quick connection between the volunteers starting under State patronage, and sadly tried to understand how their relations are changed upon passing under United States control, and the General Government, who can alone relieve their wants.

My recent experience in the West has confirmed all my expectations of the feasibility of such a service, and removed every doubt which others had raised, in regard to the cheerful acceptance on the part of officers and surgeons, of this extra-

ordinary intervention. I went, in some little anxiety, as to the welcome I might receive as the envoy of that mixed body, scientific, medical, military, and civil, the Sanitary Commission. But I found my way prepared before me. Tidings of the appointment of the commission had already spread far and wide. Orders for our cordial reception had providently gone forth from the War Department. From the highest to the lowest officials, the most generous courtesy, the most willing co-operation, the most grateful sympathy, flowed without any interruption from a jealous etiquette, or an imperilled dignity. The officers of the Regular Army were just as kind and cordial as those of the Volunteers, and I am now sure that none of the difficulties anticipated from a conflict of powers, are at all likely to arise with a reasonable discretion on our part. Indeed, no averted eye, or cold shoulder, either from a medical or military official, chilled my heart, in a visit extended to 20,000 troops, to twenty hospitals, to hundreds of medical gentlemen, and yet, I spared no warning, no remonstrance, no earnest words of entreaty, made necessary by what I found defective in the Camp-police, the Hospital arrangements, the inexperience of officers. Plain, honest, earnest, direct words, kindly and sympathizingly spoken, were the only weapons found necessary, besides the governmental authority to utter them. This was indispensable, and it was a great boon to possess it.

I cannot here spread out the ample details which I proceed to Washington this evening to lay before the Sanitary Commission and the Government, as materials towards a correct judgment and immediate action. The general impression, however, which my visit to Camp Dennison, near Cincinnati, Camp McClellan, at Cairo, Camp Pope, at Alton, and other smaller collections of Western troops made upon me, I do earnestly desire at once to communicate.

A nobler, manlier, a more intelligent, earnest, and valuable

body of troops was never gathered on the earth's surface, than the 20,000 men I saw in these camps! They are fully equal to the best of our Eastern troops in clothing and equipments, and better than that, their equals in moral force, and directness and seriousness of purpose. I have visited them in their tents and barracks, hastily of course; seen them in the ranks, witnessed their evolutions, and marked their drill; messed with the men and with their officers; conversed freely with hundreds in the hospitals, which now, all told, hold perhaps near a thousand of the 20,000, who are more or less seriously ill;—but sick or well, in camp or on parade, I have seen only one spirit—a profound love of country, a solemn sense of the necessity of this war, a willingness to die in defence of the sacred interests at stake, with a most assured sense that God was behind and victory before them! Since the earliest and best days of the War of the Reformation, no such spirit has stirred soldiers in the field, as that which now animates our troops. Nor were so many priceless lives ever so freely offered for an end so devotedly held to be worth all it can cost. The perils of the actual battlefield are nothing to such men; the injury their open enemies can do them, almost not worth thinking of;—but will malaria, fever, pestilence—irrational and viewless enemies—be as little dangerous? No! It is before these inglorious but deadly foes, that our brave boys will flinch, before their unseen weapons that they will fall! Their generous and self-devoted officers are likely to be the first to suffer. They share the hardships, they more than share the labor and exposure of their commands. They have the best purposes. But they know not yet how to control the diet, the personal habits, the ventilation and police of their quarters and camps. They are studying war *tactics*, intent on making *soldiers*; they rashly assume that intelligent men know how to take care of themselves; and they are already finding camp-dysentery seiz-

ing their regiments with a most threatening grasp. The most striking difference is already apparent in camps and troops, according as attention is given or denied, to the character of the water used, the situation of the camp with reference to the prevailing winds, and to the regulation of sinks and the cleansing of tents and quarters. Two regiments, separated by a quarter of a mile only, contained, in one camp not a dozen sick men; in the other, 250 men more or less ill with dysenteric diarrhœa, and all because one was on a plain with decent well-water at hand, the other in a wood, with a wretched puddle of black ditch-water as the only resource for drinking and cooking! Do you ask, will medical men and officers, too, stand with folded arms and see this go on without immediate and energetic remonstrance and action? They will, I reply, under some provision of military etiquette, or some governmental obstacle—which it requires the boldness and decision of a power in confidential relations with the War Department, to put aside. We possess this power.

But, gentlemen, I must spare you and the public and myself any further details. I am confident I have said enough to stimulate your utmost energies in supplying us with the means of immediately sending efficient men, experts in sanitary matters, into every camp and fortress, and of keeping them there under our direction, and fortified with all the authority of our Commission, to warn, instruct and befriend our officers and men, cooperating with the noble physicians who have so largely volunteered in this war, in preventing all the disease that can be prevented by sanitary science, and in assuaging and mitigating all that must inevitably visit our troops. You, with the response which the public will give your honored names, must place us in a position of moral independence, by enabling us to dispense with all pecuniary support from the Government. The Government has given us what is far more important, its

sanction, and its authority. We seek, from sources that you command, the material aid, which at your hands we can receive without loss of moral power and position with the country and the army. Thanking you in advance in the name of the army, the Government and the Commission, for any labors and sacrifices you may make in our behalf,

I remain, gentlemen,

Your obliged friend and servant,

HENRY W. BELLOWS,

President of the Sanitary Commission.