


At the
Dry Tortugas
During the War



by **Emily Holder**

Part Four

On December thirteenth, we were aroused by the report that several steamers were coming in and others in sight.

We expected that it must be for another change of command, and all was confusion, the people running to the bastion with glasses, for we could see the stars and stripes, and the band on one steamer was playing “Yankee Doodle”.

Our anxiety was soon dispelled by the first steamer’s announcing that all they wanted was coal, and the privilege of stretching their limbs on land awhile, and soon the fort swarmed with soldiers who devastated the bakery and went about peering into everything, evidently very much entertained.

They strolled about a few hours, then gave place to the next steamer. There were twenty-four vessels in all, but they did not all come in. It was General Bank’s Red River Expedition. Other steamers followed every day until they all passed or came in; they were to rendezvous at Ship Island, when they would know their destination.

On January 1st, 1863, the steamer Magnolia visited Fort Jefferson and we exchanged hospitalities. One of the officers who dined with us said it was the first time in nine months he had sat at a home table, having been all that time on the blockade.

Mr. Leavitt, an officer from the Magnolia, told us that on the blockade of St. Andrews, where they had been stationed, they were ordered ashore to destroy the salt works, and that people who were far from being poor, were living on cornmeal cake without salt. They could not get it even to “put down” their pork, which was their chief dependence. Salt was fifty dollars a bag, and men came from a long distance in Georgia, offering treble that sum; but there was none to be had. Later in the season we saw steamers from Havana every few days taking small craft loaded with salt around by us, going into the inlets and bays, where there was no blockade.

Colonel Alexander, our new Commander, said that in Jacksonville, where they paid visits to the people, the young ladies would ask to be excused from not rising; they were



ashamed to expose their uncovered feet, and their dresses were calico pieced from a variety of kinds.

We received a paper on the 10th of January, which was read in turns by the residents, containing rumors of the emancipation which was to take place on the first, but we had to wait another mail for the official announcement.

I asked a slave who was in my service if he thought he should like freedom. He replied, of course he should, and hoped it would prove true; but the disappointment would not be as great as though it was going to take away something they had already possessed. I thought him a philosopher.

In Key West, many of the slaves had already anticipated the proclamation, and as there was no authority to prevent it, many people were without servants. The colored people seemed to think "Uncle Sam" was going to support them, taking the proclamation in its literal sense. They refused to work, and as they could not be allowed to starve, they were fed, though there were hundreds of people who were offering exorbitant prices for help of any kind—a strange state of affairs, yet in their ignorance one could not wholly blame them. Colonel Tinelle would not allow them to leave Fort Jefferson, and many were still at work on the fort.

John, a most faithful boy, had not heard the news when he came up to the house one evening, so I told him, then asked if he should leave us immediately if he had his freedom.

His face shone, and his eyes sparkled as he asked me to tell him all about it. He did not know what he would do. The next morning Henry, another of our good boys, who had always wished to be my cook, but had to work on the fort, came to see me, waiting until I broached the subject, for I knew what he came for. He hoped the report would not prove a delusion. He and John had laid by money, working after hours, and if it was true, they would like to go to one of the English islands and be "real free."

I asked him how the boys took the news as it had been kept from them until now, or if they had heard a rumor whether they thought it one of the soldier's stories.

"Mighty excited, Missis," he replied. "We dun sleep berry little las' night," shaking his head in a very solemn way.

Henry had been raised in Washington by a Scotch lady, who promised him his freedom when he became of age; but she died before that time arrived, and Henry had been sold with the other household goods.



The former slaves behaved very well when the news was fully established, and as they could not get away, continued to work for themselves on the fort, as they could earn more that way than any other.

The free men would not come down from Key West, although Captain Ellis had orders every trip he made to bring back somebody who would work, he offered exorbitant prices, but the negroes were having a beautiful time doing nothing, and we had to wait and do without.

A lady in Key West who owned a number of slaves had little cabins for them in the rear of her house, separated by a fence. When they were declared free, they all left the house and retired to their cabins, and Government provided them with rations. They would look over the fence and see their mistress, who had never performed such duties, cooking and doing her own work; and ask her how she liked it. She replied with a spirit I wondered at, knowing how she felt on the subject, that "she was learning and getting along very well."

After a few months matters adjusted themselves and they came back to her. She hired as many as she wanted for the house and said she was better off than when she had them all to take care of.

One day, early in the spring, Colonel Alexander, who was very watchful and always on the alert, was quite alarmed by seeing some twenty vessels hovering just in sight. Extra guard was mounted, the big guns were loaded and the men slept by them all night; but the vessels passed by without coming nearer.

The Inspector-General, after returning to Beaufort, made rather an overturning in Key West which was under the command of Colonel Morgan of the Ninetieth New York, who had been rather playing the tyrant.

He had perverted a very good order of General Hunter into one that ordered every person who had friends in the rebel service to leave Key West allowing them only fifty pounds of baggage apiece. They protested, plead with him, even threatened, for it would almost depopulate the town, but in vain.

Justice, however, was nearer than he suspected, for just as the vessel was to start with these people who were being set adrift, a steamer came in bringing Colonel Goode of the Forty-Seventh Pennsylvania to relieve Colonel Morgan.

The people were almost crazy in their excitement. They took the soldiers' knapsacks as they marched up the street and would have carried the men on their shoulders in their joy over Morgan's defeat.



Colonel Goode came to Tortugas a few days afterwards, and while there said he might send the remainder of the Regiment down to us—something very reassuring for the summer as they were acclimated and would be more likely to withstand any epidemic that might occur.

The dreaded month of June came again and found us in Key West—to break the terrible monotony of island life.

The feeling in Key West between the various political factions became more and more intensified as time went on. The sectional spirit had been so strong that it had almost resulted in the residents keeping entirely aloof from each other, although the greater part of them professed to be Unionists.

Those who owned the greatest number of slaves were at times defiant, although made no attempt to join the other side. Society was anything but pleasant, and we felt that the efforts of General Woodbury, who was now Military Governor, to bring people into more friendly relations were most commendable, and were seemingly successful.

Just as we were about ready to go down to the boat before starting for Key West, some one came for us to go to the ramparts as there was a fight at sea; one of our gun-boats was firing at a big steamer.

Taking the glass we were soon with the others on top of the Fort, and, surely enough, about five miles out was an immense steamer emitting a dense black smoke, which announced its character as only the Confederates used soft coal, and when they were running away, as that one evidently was, they put in pine wood or anything they had.

She was running from a little boat that in comparison was like a pigmy. Two larger steamers were trying to head her off, and they passed out of sight in that position. There were between twenty and thirty guns fired, and all in all it was quite an exciting affair.

We saw nothing of them on our way to Key West, but the day after our arrival a steamer brought into port a large Mississippi River boat, a side wheeler, loaded high upon deck with cotton—a prized valued at half a million dollars.

Colonel Alexander met one of the owners of the steamer who said that the people in the south were hopeless; but, he added, “we have nothing now to lose and we are going to fight as long as we can.”

I met at the hotel a lady from Mobile who ran the blockade with her husband on a vessel loaded with cotton. She said she stood on deck all the time they were being fired at, and would avow herself a Secessionist at the cannons’ mouth.



Her husband lost a large amount of property in the steamer. He was going to Europe while she returned to Mobile with her three children.

The straits to which we often became reduced on these days, in out-of-the-way Florida, was more amusing than serious.

My sister informed me before I left Tortugas that we were reduced to one needle between us and to be sure and remember to bring some back with me. I found some needles but there was not a piece of cotton cloth or muslin in the stores of Key West.

Upon our return to Tortugas, we heard that brave Colonel Putnam, who marched out of Fort Jefferson only a few months before, so proud of his regiment and so hopeful, had been shot at Morris Island.

It cast a gloom over our little circle that had known him so well, bringing home to us the horrors that were so familiar to the people of the North.

The latter part of August, 1863, Mr. Hall, who with his wife, had been long with us, was ordered away. He was a very efficient officer and we heard long afterwards that his bravery under fire was remarkable. Their departure was most tantalizing to them and to us somewhat amusing. It showed more clearly than anything else would our isolated condition, for our only legitimate means of getting away was by sail; whenever we had steam conveyance it was by special favor.

We had given some farewell entertainments to Mr. And Mrs. Hall, and Saturday afternoon saw them on Board the boat that was to carry them directly to Pensacola. When ready to sail the wind suddenly failed, and the vessel could not get away from the wharf.

The doctor went down and brought them back with him to tea after which they returned to the boat, hoping that during the night a breeze would spring up, but in the morning there the boat lay, and they breakfasted with the colonel. Later all went down again to see them off, as a breeze gently flapped the flag, but it was dead ahead, making it impossible to get out of the narrow channel, which in some places was not wide enough for two vessels to pass each other, and beating out was impossible, so they came up to tea again and spent the evening.

The next morning the doctor looked out of the window and exclaimed: "There they go!" when suddenly as we were watching, the masts became perfectly motionless. We knew only too well what that meant. They had run on to the edge of the reef, within hailing distance of the Fort, and the doctor with others, went out and spent the morning with



them, as they refused to come on shore again. Mr. Hall said he was going to “stand by the ship.”

In the course of the day, by kedging as the sailors call it, putting out the anchor and pulling the boat up to it, then throwing it out again further on, they managed to crawl to the first buoy, and there lay in the broiling sun.

Mr. Hall remarked that at that rate of speed the war would be over before he reached Charleston, where he was ordered, for it was then Tuesday and they had only made a half a mile since Saturday night, and had been aground once.

Some one replied that it was fortunate that the *Wishawken* had captured the *Atlanta* and that the *Florida* after running the blockade from Mobile under the British colors, rarely came near our coast, for they certainly would have been captured had there been a privateer in those waters.

The next morning when we went on top of the Fort, the sails of the schooner were just a white speck on the northern horizon, and we could hear music from the steamer, which was bringing Colonel Goode for his monthly inspection of the troops.

Our rains continued occasionally later than usual, one in the middle of September almost ending in a hurricane; so rough was it that the *Clyde*, a long, graceful, English-built steamer, that came in for coal with the *Sunflower*, had to remain several days. The *Clyde* had quite a serious time in reaching the harbor. We watched it through a porthole with great anxiety. It was too strong a wind for us to venture on the ramparts, but we could walk all about inside seeing everything that came in from our safe lookout.

Colonel Goode on his last trip had left the regiment band for us awhile, so that guard mount and dress parade were important features, while the naval officers went about visiting the various houses, keeping us bright and gay while they were weather bound.

The high winds ended in a severe norther-an almost unheard of thing so early in the season. Later we saw by a paper that they had snow in New York the latter part of August; it might have been the same cold wave that swept down over the Gulf, for it housed us shivering.

While the band was with us the ramparts were the favorite places for viewing dress parade, and the colonel gave the ladies all the pleasure he could, having the band play on parade during the evening.

My old cook, Aunt Eliza, visited us occasionally, as she said she felt that she “blonged” to me.



I asked how she was getting on with the new husband. "Oh," she said, "he's cross as the berry debbil hisself."

"Why did you not get a good one this time?" I asked, "Jack was so cross you could not get along with him?"

"Why, missus, Jack was a bery angel in hebben by de side ob dis yer one," was her reply, laughing as though it were more a cause for joking than a serious matter of complaint. "But I hear, missis," she added, "you hab John de foug to do yo' errands. Dey's good boys, dey is, but dey'll soon be 'gwine away w'en Mars Linkum dun send 'em free papers down yere; heaps dem niggers gwine to 'stuction in dem days.

"I'se gwine ter stay wid Mis' Fogarty; she's boun' to tek cyare ob me. I don't want none o' dem papers; I'se too old; dey'll do fur Classy and Sophy and sich gals, but I'se too ole, too ole, marm."

She did not take her freedom upon hearsay; hers was to be a document "right from Mars Linkum."

A remittant fever broke out and we were ill for three weeks. It was very much like the break-bone fever; extreme suffering in the limbs and back seemed to be the prevailing feature of the attacks. At the same time they were digging a ditch around close to the wall of the Fort, which made it pass between the house and kitchen as the latter was in the casemates.

The rains, of course, swelled the size of the brook so that the bridge over it, when the wind blew, as it seemed to most of the time, was rather an insecure passage, as it was five feet wide and from three to four deep, and to cross that every time one went into the kitchen was no small annoyance, and the contrivances to get the meals into the dining-room got required no little ingenuity.

Some very funny things happened during the high winds in the transportation of the dishes, as a sudden gust of wind coming round the corner of the house with the force of a steam engine, taking the contents of the dish the boy grasped, while with the other hand he clutched the one railing, and, under the shelter of the piazza, which he had reached with an empty plate, watched his dry toast floating off, bread literally "cast upon the waters."

At another time when it really seemed a doubtful chance of getting over safely, the head of the house offered to convey the platter, on which was a fine roast beef, it being one of the feast days, and we stood in the doorway to watch the passage.



He was just over when a whiz came and a thud, and we saw an empty platter and a man watching a roast of beef sliding across the piazza. His look of disgust and mortification overpowered all other feelings, and we rushed to the rescue of the beef, with peals of laughter.

On the 8th of November, 1863, a steamer came in with one hundred and twenty-five prisoners from the prisons at the North, which were running over with bounty jumpers, deserters, and men who had committed a variety of misdemeanors. We had heard that Tortugas was going to be made a military prison for our soldiers and were rather dreading it.

Captain McFarland had been unable to secure workmen enough to expend the appropriation, and it was still considered necessary to push the work on the fort as rapidly as possible, so that the prisoners were turned over to the engineers' department as laborers.

The morning after their arrival they were drawn up in a line and the overseer of the works took the name of each man, their occupation and trade, then they were turned over to the department they could work in, and as all trades nearly were represented, things began to look brisk again, yet when I saw the men at work I did not think that lot of prisoners would complete the work, nor many more like them. I could not help a feeling of pity, so many of them ought not to have been sent there. I presume there was little time at the North for discrimination after a man had been found guilty, perhaps for drunkenness, or disrespect to his commanding officer, who might have been a comrade at home, that was exercising an authority over the man who had not yet learned to obey in true military spirit. Many cases as trivial as these might have resulted in a season at Tortugas, whilst others were deserving all and more of a punishment than a few years of life at work, on the fort, for they fared almost, if not quite as well as the paid workmen, only they could not get away or go outside the fort after dark.

With all the precaution, however, two prisoners took a boat one dark night, rowed to Loggerhead and there found a sailboat, and sailed away; no one every knew whether they reached the mainland or went to the bottom of the Gulf-the latter, probably.

We were delighted to welcome Captain Van Syce, the U. S. gunboats Sunflower and the Clyde again, and at the same time Captain MCFarland paid us a flying visit.

While they were all there, we had the most severe norther of the winter, the mercury falling to fifty-seven degrees. The fish floated ashore they were so chilled, and we had fires for nearly a fortnight. The wind filled the air with sand, cutting the skin like sleet, and



people went about with overcoats on, looking as though they were buffeting a northeast snowstorm.

Captain Bowers was detained a week, and the Tortugas was delayed in Havana harbor for twelve days by the gale.

A large steamer was seen off Loggerhead, and the Clyde went out to it. She proved to be from Baltimore with a cavalry regiment for New Orleans and a lot of cattle. They had been out in all the gale, and the poor creatures had not eaten or drank since starting, and they were stopping to let them rest.

The Catawba came with cattle for us, making seven vessels in the harbor—two steamers. A vessel had arrived with one hundred and twenty-five workmen, another with brick, and the work was rapidly progressing.

The prisoners in the main were growing better contented, as most of them realized that they might be in a much worse place, for as yet there was plenty of room and their work not hard.

The new year of 1864 was ushered in with cold winds and rain, so that a fire on the hearth gave us both comfort and company, and during the night more rain fell than in any one day during the year, accompanied by severe thunder and lightning. On the second day, a steamer came bringing the veteran troops who had been North for thirty days, looking like another set of men, so benefited were they by that short change.

On the nineteenth the Tortugas came in, bringing Mr. Holgate and Captain McFarland, without a northern mail, but with the news, which seemed to fly sometimes so mysterious was its coming. The regiment was to be moved to Louisiana and the New York One Hundred and Tenth Regiment would replace the Forty-seventh Pennsylvania with us, and a colored regiment would be stationed in Key West. Captain McFarland was ordered to Mobile, and Mr. Frost was going to New York for a two months' leave. It was enough news, without a mail. The troops had been so long with us, we hoped they would not be changed until the following autumn, we so much dreaded having unacclimated people sent to us before the summer. Some of the officers had sent for their families, and they had already arrived in Key West.

We had at that time over two hundred prisoners sent there for all kinds of crimes, from murderers to the pettiest offenders—some for life with hard labor, others for five, ten, fifteen years, down to as many months, and our little island had become known to the world as the Dry Tortugas.



Colonel Alexander had quite an alarm during this month. After it was over, they said it was needless, yet such a thing could not be passed by without taking action thoroughly and investigating matters. Three of the prisoners went to the colonel and told him that the prisoners were making dirks and knives out of everything they could get that could be turned into such weapons, and some night when the Matchless and Tortugas were both in, they were to spike the guns, kill people if they resisted, and sail away—something very difficult to carry out, yet the attempt might have been exceedingly unpleasant and disastrous to somebody. It was impossible to prevent them from prowling about the casemates, as the place was not made for a prison, except the small one by the guard-room at the Sallyport. The casemates were simply boarded in, as the necessity for more sleeping rooms arose. It was hardly a pleasant thought that we were inside of a prison, not knowing who were desperadoes and who were not, without any means of protecting ourselves against them, for before all that I hardly think any one ever locked a door. Whether there was any truth in the matter or not, the colonel saw fit to prepare a room in the casemates, where about thirty of the prisoners were locked up every night and a guard stationed at the entrance.

The guns were always examined night and morning, and we, of course, felt easier when we saw all that extra caution.

It was an imposition to send prisoners there who ought to have been put in the penitentiary, yet every one felt that, but there was no remedy for it.

One of them became angry at another prisoner who was sent to convey a message from one of the officers, some words passed between them, when he drew a knife stabbing the messenger twice just missing the heart, he was put in irons and drew a ball and chain for occupation after that.

On the twenty-third we saw a steamer over the ramparts and concluded that the exchange had come, but to our great disgust it proved to be one hundred and seventy more prisoners, really there seemed a prospect of the fort being turned into a penitentiary.

It was followed during the day by another steamer, bringing Captain Hook with marching orders for the Forty-Seventh, that steamer taking the Key West troops to New Orleans and in two weeks the One Hundred and Tenth was to take its place.

We saw by the papers that the weather had been very cold in New Orleans accounting for the low mercury with us, for some three weeks we had fires and wore our thickest clothing that had not been needed since leaving the north.



A theatrical performance gotten up by the soldiers one evening was a very creditable entertainment and the audience an appreciative one. We were sorry they had not started it before, but of course they did not expect to be ordered away.

We were very much startled one night by heavy firing outside and seeing danger signal rockets, which was soon followed by six guns inside the fort, sounding in the still night as if everything was coming down about our ears.

The Matchless was at the wharf and went out to find the transport McLellan on the reef. The excitement could hardly have been greater had we been attacked.

Three of the prisoners gave us quite an excitement by taking a boat and rowing away. There was nothing in but the little sail-boats, and Colonel Alexander with a crew started off in pursuit, as soon as they were found to be running away, but the wind failed and finally became a dead calm.

We watched them from the ramparts until they disappeared, and the disappointed Colonel had to spend the better part of the day becalmed in the scorching sun, while the prisoners rowed away toward Cuba, they were never heard from and most likely escaped it was so calm.

On the 28th of February the One Hundred and Tenth New York arrived to relieve the Forty-Seventh, bringing a mail with the news of General Grant being made Command-in-Chief of the Army. The excitement incident to the changing of the troops in garrison was always great, for so much had to be done in a short time, and as we were always left behind it was a sad time, giving us a feeling of unrest that clung to us until we became interested in the new people.

The coming ashore of the new troops who stacked their arms waiting for the quarters that were being vacated by the departing Regiment. The officers going about to say good-bye, and some always taking their last meal with us, and finally the columns marching out always to the tune of "The Girl I Left Behind Me." Then the watching of the steamer from the ramparts could never be divested of a certain sorrow as if it were a final leave-taking of friends with whom the association could scarcely be understood except by people who have lived a garrison life.

Then came the choosing of quarters by the new people, which we fortunately did not borrow trouble about, as we occupied those belonging to the Engineering Department and were never disturbed.

In a week everything was back into the accustomed routine-guard mount in the morning and dress parade at night, the only change being all new faces. As I look down the



vista of all these years that have gone it is hard to realize the isolation of Tortugas life; the heat continuous for six months and more at a time; the mosquitoes—a pest that at times tested our amiability to the utmost, obliging us to sit under tents of netting.

Added to all this there were times when living was so deplorable, our appetites failed, and a Barmecide feast was always before us.

We studied the cook books for receipts that were only an aggravation, with the energy of despair. The only variety in our walks was around the seawall or on the ramparts, where the sky for nearly eight months in the year was one grand, burnished dome, that met the seemingly illimitable sea in all directions, reflecting millions of rays of heat that took our strength and courage.

Yet, with all this, there was little complaint; I think all were heroic, and deserved more praise and credit for endurance than was ever received, for very much was enjoyed socially, and the residents of the islands did not grow weary of each other.

The last of March the steamer Erickson came in and ran around, having on board the remainder of the One Hundred and Tenth New York Regiment already on the island, and fifty-seven additional prisoners.

Pleasant weather continued into April; the nights were cool and the days not too warm for exercise; we now had our first thunder storm, which was a sign of summer. About the middle of the month I accepted an invitation from Mrs. W—— to visit them as they were to leave Key West for the North the first of May.

The enjoyment is still fresh with me, and we renewed our friendship that had lost none of its tenderness in the days that had intervened, since we watched them sail away out into the night, leaving us alone so many months before.

The time was filled with riding and meeting our friends who came to see us.

Admiral Baily, who was now in command of the flagship, and Captain and Mrs. Temple, Mr. and Mrs. Herrick, Judge Boynton and many others were there whom it was always pleasant to meet.

The feeling of secession was not appeased, and the undercurrent of animosity, like the rumbling of a volcano, created an atmosphere that was not permitted to interfere with the home life at headquarters, which was always a happy one. General Woodbury was a man of the most sterling character, a true Christian, and one whose influence for good unconsciously stimulated all who came in contact with him. Genial, quiet in his manner, with a keen sense of humor, he was a charming host, and aided by his wife, who in every



way supplemented these many ennobling qualities, their home was a model one wherever duty assigned them.

We were just far enough from town, with pleasant people all about us at the barracks, and we tried to forget the element of discord that was so dominant there, and did enjoy very much, although there would a look of weariness and anxiety in the midst of it all, come over the face of the general that made it an effort, we knew, for him to always put the gloom and sorrow that so enveloped our beloved country entirely out of sight.

The children were happy and we enjoyed all their pleasures, and a house full of their merry voices was an antidote for many outside evils.

I remember a wistful look one morning, that came back to me afterwards so strongly, I wonder I did not almost feel it as a premonition of sorrow in store for those so dearly loved.

One of the boys had just finished his music lesson, given him by his mother, and they both had left the room. The general sat listening to the voices of the three boys who were going horseback riding; he watched them as they rode away, and said “what a lonely house this will be in another month; but if any thing should happen to me—” and his voice trembled as he added: “I am blessed with such a wife all will be well.”

How kind is Providence that hides the future and leads us gently on, else how could we live and struggle without the hope that sustains us through all, in the blissful ignorance that enfolds us.

Captain and Mrs. Hook had taken ten with us and spent the evening, and about nine, just as they were sitting down to a game of whist, Captain McFarland came in, saying that the admiral was very anxious about the steamer, Honeysuckle, and wanted the Tortugas to go in search of her, so another hour found us on board the schooner on the way to Fort Jefferson.