Interviews: Charles A. Dana's Recollections of the Civil War

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http://hdl.handle.net/10456/27477

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December 18th, 1896.

When I first went there there was only one assistant Secretary, Peter H. Watson. He went in with Mr. Stanton.

It was one of the first appointments that Mr. Stanton made. There was also there, when I went there, Mr. Tucker--Mr. John Tucker, who was also an assistant secretary. He was from Philadelphia. He did not remain long after I went there. He had been on the point of retiring for some time. I think he went in with the idea of being very useful owing to his knowledge of railroad business. He was very useful for a time until it had gotten otherwise organized. I think Mr. Tucker was brought in on the advice of Mr. Scott, who was at the head of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, and because he had had a great deal of experience and knowledge of the railroad business, and used to looking after the contracts and supervising their service and could attend to it better than any one who was not familiar with the railroad business. When I went there Mr. Watson and I were the only assistants. I remember Mr. Watson withdrew. He was a distinguished patent lawyer.

When I went there the Adjutant was General Thomas--Gen'l Lorenzo Thomas; he had been there a great many years; he didn't remain very long after I went there. He was employed
outside in organizing the negro troops and looking after them
and the working and acting. Adjutant was General Townsend,
who was appointed to the office as soon as General Thomas re-
signed.

They were assistants to the Secretary in the military---
in the strictly military department---military organization;
and the amount of work to be done was enormous, such as
had never been conceived of when the organization of the
army was established. Mr. Stanton had these two gentlemen,
who were aid-de-camps. I do not remember what their details
were. Colonel Hardy was the military man. Pelouze remained
there as long as Mr. Stanton did. They were military as-
sistants to him personally.

I got there about 9 o'clock in the morning. I can
only say what I did. When I went to the office I would find
on my table a big pile of papers which were to be acted on---
papers of every sort, that had come there from the different
departments of the office. The first thing I did was to go
through those papers and, in most cases, send them to and
report to the department they ought to go to. If it was a
question relating to the Ordnance Department---supply of
arms and ammunition, I would send them there with a report.
Very often when there was a necessity we would send for the Chief officer himself to come there and report verbally. We would stay there pretty nearly the whole day. I made it a rule never to go away until my desk was cleared. Mr. Watson had a different plan. His papers would lie on the desk several days. He would finish up what he was doing before he turned it aside. It was a place where everybody was busy, I assure you—no time to read novels.

He used to do that. I did not work at night at all. My eyes would not allow me to do so. I had to work in the day time. He worked a great deal at night and he was often at the Department very late; they kept his carriage waiting for him.

I would send it to the Chief of Ordnance for information on some specific point and he would send it back with the information and then it would be necessary that that same order should be given about it. Then I would take it to the Secretary and state the case to him. I would say to him: Here I have this case; here are the papers and I would tell him everything there was in the papers and what reports had been made from the various departments and he would tell me what order to make and I would make the order and send it to the
proper place. "By order of the Secretary of War. C.A. Dana, Assistant Secretary of War." A letter would come for instance from New York City from General Dix, who commanded here, asking for orders in a certain case and it would very likely come to me first and then go to the Secretary's office, and more frequently it would come to me first and I would read it and make a brief on the back of it—what it was about, take it to the Secretary, read it to him, or would tell him what it was about—that he would like better because it was shorter, and he would give his order, and I would execute the order.

Very likely; that depended on circumstances. They sent a great many to me because they knew the Secretary had a heap of papers on his desk all the time. They would send them to me because they knew they would be acted on quicker and would get their orders sooner. I cleaned it off every day; never went away with a pile of papers remaining on my table. They knew the Secretary was very busy and it might not be attended to at once.

Olcott is now the head of the Theosophists in India. I had a letter from him to day
I always found Stanton very pleasant. If you didn't understand and didn't do the thing he wanted you to do he would get mad. I only remember one case where he was angry with me in my whole service with him and then I turned the laugh on him. It was a curious case.

There was a Member of Congress named Straus and belonged to the Chosen People. He was a very good man and got away down to the mouth of the James River where General Butler was at Fortress Monroe and he was going away out of the Confederacy. The orders were that when any man came to you, any commanding officer, and wished to go out of the Confederacy, the first thing to do was to examine him and take possession of all the money he had because a man could buy up down there at a discount some United States money and get out. General Butler had taken from this Virginian about $50,000 to $75,000. When any General took any money he at once had to deposit it in the Treasury so that it was in Washington, and there was a strict account kept of how much was taken, who it was taken by and who it was taken from. Butler gave a receipt to the man. Well, this man came to Washington to get his money; he came to the War Department and bothered Mr. Stanton a good
deal. Finally Mr. Stanton sent for me. Said he: Straus is after me and he wants this money and I want you to settle it. I said: What shall I do; what are the orders, and he took the paper and wrote on the back of it "Referred to Mr. Dana, Assistant Secretary of War, to be settled as and in his judgment shall think best. M. A. Stanton" signed in full, and so I looked at the thing. The man turned his attentions from the Secretary to me and I looked into it and I gave him back the money. The next day Mr. Stanton sent for me and I saw he was angry. Said he: "Did you give that Jew back his money." I said: "Yes, sir." He said: "Well, I should like to know by what authority you did it." Said I: "If you will excuse me while I go to my room I will show it to you." So I went up and brought it down and I read it to him: "Referred to Mr. Dana, Assistant Secretary of War, to be settled as in his judgment shall think best" and I handed it over to him and he laughed and said: "You are right. You have got me this time. That was the only time he really spoke to me in a harsh tone.

I think they are exaggerated. He would be vituperative and would speak in a very peremptory tone and he could be as peremptory as anybody; but I never heard him say anything
that could be called vituperation. There were certain men that he had little faith in and I have heard him speak to them in a tone of servility. He would make that impression no doubt.

Stanton had the loveliest smile I ever saw on a human face—it gleamed and beamed. If he liked a man he was always very pleasant to him. You see I was with him for several years in the most confidential relations and I tell you that is the only instance that I can recall of his speaking to me in a harsh tone. His tone when I would go in to his office and open a subject was just about as harsh as could be. I have seen him with other men. He had great affection for Watson. I don't remember any case in which I thought he was really unjust. He was a man of the quickest intelligence and understood a thing before he had half of it told to him, and his judgment was just as swift and when he got hold of a man who did not understand, who did not state the case clearly, why he was very impatient.

That was a very strong point—I should say that was his strongest point—his power as an advocate, his power to state the thing.

I will tell you a little story about him. I think I have written this story once in the North American Review,
about 15 years ago. There was a man, I think he was a Jew, to whom we employed to go to Richmond, and he went to Richmond, or rather he got into that employment. He went to Richmond and he could get through the lines and he would get almost anything through the lines. He would go down to Richmond and he get there a lot of orders for ladies bonnets, etc., and have a contraband of these things ---more or less contraband. He would come up with these things and would distribute them in Richmond and would be there several days and would then come to Washington and report at first to me or to Colonel Baker, very often, but generally I would get it and would write down his statements; they were usually valuable. He would go and buy a lot of goods and go back. Very likely he would furnish also a report to the rebels of what we were doing. But that I had no evidence of. This was towards the end of the war. This Colonel Baker was a sort of detective officer and had a commission in some military service and used to report to me every day. Baker examined our friends goods that he was taking down and found things that were contraband. He wouldn't stand for it. Mr. Stanton said: "Arrest him." So he was arrested and his goods were taken and we got all of his invoices. He bought the goods in
Baltimore and found that the stores there, the commercial houses, that we supposed to be perfectly straight were carrying on this contraband through this man and would supply him with goods that were used for contraband. After that we stopped the whole thing. When we got his invoices and saw who he had bought these goods from I got the names of most all of these merchants and put them in the Old Capitol Prison. This was done about this time (4.15) one afternoon and the next day you could not buy a pair of gloves in Baltimore --- the shops were all closed. Two days after there came over a deputation of clergymen and merchants and bankers from Baltimore of social eminence and I went down on some little business to the Secretary's office. My office was on the floor above him and after I got through and was starting to go the Secretary said: "Come back here. There has been a lot of Baltimore merchants and Clergyman to see the President about this fellow in the Old Capitol Prison and he sent them over to me. Now you stay here and you will see something and hear something that will be interesting. So I went around to the back of his table. He had chairs set in front of the fire, and it was a very bright fire. I saw 20 gentlemen in black coats and gloves come in, and they took seats on one side of the fire and the Secretary sat over
in the other corner. The Secretary had always two or three stenographers that were employed because we always had so much writing to do. The Secretary said: "Gentlemen, we are ready to hear you," and they began to make speeches on the subject of this arrest and of its harshness and unjustifiable nature. One would finish and then another would take it up. It must have lasted a good part of an hour. When they finished he inquired if they wanted to add anything and they said no. He began to deliver his speech. I think it was the most brilliant specimen of a speech that I ever listened to. He described the magnitude of the war and the sacrifices it imposed, and the 300,000 of our young men who had been laid in untimely graves. Not one of these gentlemen answered him but took up their hats silently and went away. There his genius was most conspicuous. These men I think were released after awhile and the goods were sold at auction and the contraband business was broken up.

The man had done great service for us and had brought us important information that we were able to verify by other means; so we had a great deal of confidence in him and we let the business go on because it afforded a means of getting information that was sometimes very useful.
There could not be, you see guards were so strict and the risk was so great.

Nobody has ever said he cheated anybody. Stanton was a most affectionate father and a very kind and most considerate husband, but he was a suspicious man and his habits as a lawyer had also tended to promote his way of doing things, but he was a great friend and he certainly was a most superior lawyer. Nobody, not even his enemies, ever accused him of telling a lie.

I was first struck by his familiarity with the Bible. He must have gone to Sunday School when he was a boy and learned the Bible a great deal. Whether he was a religious man or not, or what sort of religion, I don't know. I don't know that I ever heard him swear. He was a man of strong nature, a man who was very fond of his friends and he had a good many friends that he liked to sit down and talk with.

Not much. He entertained, but all the members of the Cabinet did that. I should hardly say he entertained as much as Mr. Seward or Gov. Chase. He had a good deal of wit—told a story very well and he had a good deal of satire in his conversation and was very companionable.
I think they saw Col. Hardy or they saw some other man and he saw a great many; he had to; but not so many as you would think from reading the records.

Yes, unless he thought they were trying to get leave of absence that they were not fairly entitled to or were sneaking around to get anything.

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