

Roanoke Island, Dec. 19, 1863

I can not tell you how busy I am. Those who are escaping from bondage are pressing in all directions. From one to two hundred arrive every few days, and it is a matter of no small moment to know where to shelter them. They land at "headquarters," about three miles south of the camps, and walk up, bringing their children and parents, (the aged are not forgotten,) and goods and effects, when they have been so fortunate as to bring any thing with them; but there are many who escape literally "with the skin of their teeth," and need friendly eyes to look after them and friendly hands to aid. Then, *where* to shelter them, is a problem which remains to be solved in a camp where every nook and cranny is already crowded to excess. I see sights *often*, OFTEN, that make my heart ache, and which I have no power to relieve.

Shall I tell you in detail about a certain part of my duty? There is no white man in the camps to direct. A Sergeant Sanderson *belongs* there, but went home on a furlough before I came, and has not yet returned. I have to go each day and straighten out difficulties. I go with my horse; they cluster about me. I hear the statements of a colored man appointed by Mr. James to learn their wants and how they may best be relieved, and then I talk to them a little, and tell them what they must do, and what not to do, and my decisions are not only gratefully received, but blessings from every side are showered upon me. Mr. James is here but little, and of course can not attend to this, and to do it judiciously, wisely, I must visit their homes and *know for myself*.

One day I found, living in one room, "Jim" Whitby and daughter, a girl of fourteen; Clarissa Whitby and two daughters, one of whom had two children, the other five; Lavinia Whitby with five children; Charlotte Cressy and three children; Moses Midget, his wife and mother; and Priscilla, a sick, crazy girl of twenty; and her mother. This Priscilla is a most pitiable object. She has an uncontrollable desire for food; eats more than enough for three hearty men, and cries *aloud* for more, hours, every day. It is most distressing to see and hear her. Many of the babies were sick, and two died the next day, from exposure. There was no fireplace in the room, but a stove, with a little piece of straight funnel, was filled with burning wood, the smoke of which poured into the room, so that it was impossible to see across it, and every individual shivering in rags. Yet these were the souls for whom Christ died, and bodies which should be (and I believe some *are*) temples from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This is not an isolated or extreme case. Sometimes I get to thinking, thinking, until I can hardly eat or sleep. There is only one thing I *can* do that relieves my heart, and that is, what the disciples of John the Baptist did, when their master was beheaded: they *went and told Jesus*. I do the best I can; then go to him and leave my burden there.

Boxes of shoes, calicoes, coarse flannels, etc., etc., are forwarded by Mr. James for sale, and this is a most laborious duty. A crowd presses sometimes from before sunrise until nearly nine at night, to buy, to beg, or to look on, and it exhausts my strength; but there is great need, and I volunteered to do this. Yesterday a woman came, asking flannel for her sick babe. She seemed honest, but there is so much wrong-doing that I am compelled to ascertain always. So I took my horse, (I was just going out,) and followed her more than three miles, through woods and bushes, till I found her home. It was made of *pine boughs*. She and her father had made it the day before, and tough through the night previous there had been a heavy rain, she, with her father, mother, and

four children, had *staid* there, (not slept,) and were grateful for such shelter, rather than to stay in the camp. And there are *many* such instances.

Should not the government provide at least a temporary shelter for the crowds which come? Two barracks, built long ago, are FILLED, and another is in process of construction; but the heavens and the earth are visible through them in almost every direction. Scenes of suffering are witnessed there which baffle description.

I am not sure that I gave you any account of the Island. It is twelve miles in length and from four to five in width. Mr. James has laid it out in “avenues,” fifty feet in width from north to south, and streets twenty feet wide, from east to west. The land is marked off in lots containing one acre each, and any man with a family can have a lot who will build a house and cultivate the land. This, they are glad to do, and the little homes are rapidly appearing in all directions. Many are finished, and inhabited by most grateful occupants, which a multitude more are framed and read to cover, but waiting for lack of *nails*.

I am still living in a log cabin for the same reason, while one cask of nails would complete my house. I believe if I had fifty kegs of nails, I could distribute them all in two weeks, and every nail be used to advantage. I have received one hogshead of men’s clothing, for gratuitous distribution, but it is for *women and children* that clothing is especially needed.

December 24

The calls made upon my time and attention are many, varied, and *constant*, from before sunrise (that is my usual time for writing) until nearly nine at night, and I seize a moment as I can to write a line, but often before I get *half* a line written I am called. Clothing is indeed needed for women and children. There are *hundreds* here ready to perish for lack of clothing, to-night. I just put forty-three individuals into my school-room, to shield them from the biting blast. The small pox is prevailing to an alarming extent in Newbern; the clothes which they have on must of course be burned, and other clothing given them when they emerge from the hospital. This takes the most, I suppose, that is sent; and it can not be otherwise but that many will perish here.

December 25, Christmas Morn.

Dear Brother: I can not wish you a “*merry* Christmas,” for there is so much suffering about me that there is no merriment left in my heart. But I wish you a *happy* Christmas, happy in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[“Letter from Miss E. James,” *American Missionary* 8 (February 1864): 39-40.]