

Chapter IV
Failure of the insurrection; High water mark,
and parole.

A man may be very rich in this worlds goods and not have appreciation enough of his wealth to enjoy it, but keep on striving, grasping, and longing for more, this miserly covetousness is well illustrated in the native tumble bug of Indiana, that when a boy I have intently watched roll up a great ball and lay down by its immense burden and die. I believe the majority of ex-prisoners of war that were held in the South learned a lesson from the pangs of hunger that ever afterwards made them resolve to be consumers as well as amassers of wealth, and when they were ushered in to liberty they had a true conception of this worlds goods, and have been storing away very little to take to heaven. Frugality is commendable in many directions, but when it approaches the hunger line you will find every living ex-prisoner of war guarding with zealous care every approach to the vivid memory of the past, when we fair would have eaten the "Crumbs that fell from the rich mans table." Hunger and desolation was still before us, the cheerful

face of Henderson had not appeared for weeks, and parole or exchange seemed hopeless. Driven to desperation escape was planned by several of the prisoners, the chances of which was not one in a thousand yet, a few starving brave heroic men were willing to take this one chance, several men were in the secret of this desperate undertaking but, at the last moment weighing the fearful consequences but three were willing to take the risk. A young man by the name of Grimes who belonged to a Missouri regiment, and one by the name of Daves - I have forgotten his regiment - the third man I have forgotten both name and regiment. Grimes was of slender build, medium height, very dark complexion with a pair of restless black eyes, he had been in Cahaba several months and was as restless as a hyena under his confinement. Daves was a man of more than ordinary ability - a man well educated and possessing fine literary culture, and has since the war written the only account of Cahaba that has ever been published, this man was confined in Cahaba but a few months yet, he has given a vivid picture of Cahaba and also the explosion of the ^{Spanner} ~~D~~ultana. These men had been planning an escape for

Several weeks, many plans were suggested and finally a scheme was decided upon, that was accepted as the most feasible one yet suggested, the undertaking was hazardous yet, they were ready to make the attempt at the earliest possible opportunity. Escape was to be through the water closet, a brief explanation of the situation will readily convey to the reader the means of escape and its chances. Our water supply came into the prison from the north west and passed under the west wall near the north end, and was lead south-east two thirds of the distance across the prison towards the east wall to a hydrant, where the water empties in to a long box or trough used for washing; from this box the water again went under ground to the water closet near the south east corner of the prison wall. From the water closet it was conveyed directly south out under the wall and stockade. From the water closet to where the water emerged on the outside was a box large enough to receive a mans body, though a guard was keep constantly at the door of the water closet, the floor of which was laid loose and about fifteen inches above the ground, but how to raise those boards and drop through without detection was a difficult problem.

to solve. It was finally agreed that at a favorable opportunity when no one was in the water closet to have the guards attention attracted to some tempting bait, and while he was examining it to cautiously raise the boards and drop through. A trusted comrad had been selected to monopolize the attention of the guard. Finally the opportuned time arrived when the three men were in the closet and the guard had moved about two feet south of the entrance, and had his attention absorbed in a pearl handle pocket knife, every thing was ready for that awful trip of thirty feet through the box, the three men dropped quietly out of sight and reached the outside safely without detection.

The box emptied into a ravine running into the Alabama river thirty feet away, they stole down this unobserved and hugging the bank of the river at the waters edge were soon clear of Cahaba. It was about noon when these men made their escape, which was not discovered until the next morning, when we were counted as usual from the prison in to the cook yard, after we had been counted a short consultation was held between the guards and the orderly Sergeant, the figures were not satisfactory,

And we were counted back in to the building, the result was the same, ~~three~~ three short. It was just forty eight hours from the time these men escaped until they were lauded again in Cahaba, they were found the second day with blood hounds by some Citizens who had discovered them at a distance, and believing them to be escaped yankees from their appearance put blood hounds on their trail, and soon brought them to the top of a high fence to keep out of range of the dogs. It was hard to escape from Cahaba and still more difficult to escape the blood hounds. Grimes now became a conspicuous figure in Cahaba, as we heard the rattle of the shackles for months that were placed around his ankles after his recapture. There was much prejudice against men from Southern States who had enlisted in the Federal Army, and this was sufficient pretext to shackle the swarthy Grimes, whose punishment was inhuman; his ankles were nearly worn to the bone supporting the heavy rough shackles which were made of half inch round iron with lap rings fitting close around each ankle, these rings being connected by two long links, the poor fellow could step only eight or ten inches at a time, and could be heard

across the building clanking his shackles. It was now January one thousand eight hundred and sixty five, but it brought no hope, the dark grim walls of Cahaba still shut out liberty. Early in this month an unsuccessful attempt was made at insurrection which only resulted in the overpowering of the inside guard and the ultimate failure of the carefully laid scheme of the brave men that originated the daring undertaking. A short time before this attempt was made there had been added to our number a small squad of Federal prisoners, among them was a man clad in citizens garb, to conceal his identity - though in reality he was a Captain in an Illinois regiment - and his name was Harckett. The rank of Captain might have entitled him to a parole of honor, while his rank perhaps, had not been suspected, he was looked upon with mistrust by the Confederates as probably being a spy or a regular soldier. I am unable to say whether he had donned the citizens garb with a view of being more likely to get his liberty or whether he had in view the undertaking of the insurrection to set at liberty his starving comrades at Cahaba - he evidently began maturing plans for escape a few days after he entered the prison. He was a man of daring courage

and ready to assume the fearful responsibility of the undertaking, he began systematically selecting such men as in his judgment were brave, trusty, and worthy of his confidence, he had soon selected about fifty; this number was sufficient to make the attempt, the plan of procedure as I afterwards learned was briefly this. Capture the inside guard, five minutes before the relief guard came in, and when these entered through the large doors of the gang-way capture them also, the fifty select men then march quietly out side surprise the small force at Cahaba, capture all their arms, when the entire number of prisoners would march speedily to Selma, ten miles north where there was a Confederate arsenal, with only a small command of Confederates; after reaching Selma, arm and equip every prisoner and strike for the nearest point to the Federal line.

When the time had arrived to carry out the plan of the insurrection Harckett consulted his Lieutenants late in the evening of the night the attempt was to be made, every detail had been carefully arranged, the sun had gone down and all was dark within; save the light from the pine torch where the sentinals paced their beat, Harckett and his faithful band were eagerly awaiting the hour to arise, they were

Calm, cool, and deliberate, freedom was worth the attempt, and brave men were ready to risk their lives in the effort. The hours dragged slowly by, and at last the time had arrived; that old familiar call "Twelve o'clock and all is well." was passing from post to post, it would now be but five minutes when relief guard would swing open the great heavy doors in the gang-way; the inside guard must be disarmed and intimidated into silence, the relief guard must in like manner be received at the gang-way. The first part of the plan was carried out to the letter, the guard were easily overpowered and marched to the water closet in the south part of the prison; the men who were assigned the duty of capturing the relief guard, were so eager for action and the Corporal of the guard as soon as he had pulled the great doors ajar discovered instantly that something was wrong, so many men moving around hastily in the gang-way at that hour of the night, aroused his suspicion and he stepped back instantly letting the heavy latch drop into its fastening with an audible clank. The insurrection was a failure.

About this time I was awakened from sleep, by the unusual confusion of prisoners moving about, I could learn nothing of the cause for some time; I walked down towards the water closet where

I discovered the guard huddled together, and their arms just outside setting against the wall, about this time I heard the long roll out side and knew there had been an attempt made to escape.

In fifteen minutes from the time I first awoke I heard the Confederate force of Cahaba entering the Stockade, the large doors were thrown open, two pieces of artillery placed in the gunway - a company of Confederate soldiers lined up along the inside wall on the north, with fixed bayonets. Major Jones now called out give up those guard or I will blow you to h-l, the guard came sneaking forward carrying their arms.

Jones threatened us with all manner of punishment if the leaders of the mutiny as he termed it, were not turned over to him; finally they withdrew, Jones swearing he would starve us to death if the leaders were not turned over and not a ration would be issued until they were delivered up. We were now two days and nights without a bite of food, we were already in a starving condition and these two days and nights of fasting were fatal to many. Several were taken outside to prison headquarters and questioned regarding the attempt to escape, those that were taken out were true to their starving ^{friends} ~~friends~~, and preferred death by this

horrible means rather than divulge a secret that would betray a comrad.

The guard finally identified a few and through them the brave daring Hancock was identified. The meager ration was again issued, those that were discovered to be leaders of the insurrection were placed in a dark room and starved for ten days with just enough corn bread and water to sustain life, yet, they stood firm locking the secret in their breast resolved to die rather than betray others. Finally all were returned to the prison except Hancock. An old guard that stood on the inside wall often communicated with Hancock's friends, he seemed to have some sympathy for the brave man who had undergone so much cruel punishment under Major Jones. He told how Jones had tried in vain to compel this brave man to betray his comrades in the insurrection, the ravings of hunger, and burning thirst in his dark filthy cell, could not tarnish or humiliate this true man, whose life's blood was finally sacrificed because he would not betray his fellow comrades, and he died, a martyr loyal to the hidden secret that saved them.

The brave Hancock hardly counted the cost of this daring undertaking as it was planned,

most of the prisoners in Cahaba in their weak condition would ~~not~~ have been fifteen hours in getting to Selma, which was supplied with two or three rail roads and a navigable river, and in a few hours Selma would have been full of Citizens with blood hounds and rifles, perhaps, five thousand soldiers; there would of been dead yankees all the way from Cahaba to Selma and I believe it was fortunate for us that the insurrection was a failure. Captain Henderson about this time made us another visit and was still holding out hope to us of parole or exchange, this hope had so often stood for naught that I put little dependance in any promises of early liberation.

The time dragged slowly by, the surroundings of our wretchedness was filling new graves daily from Cahaba and imprinting sad history on the mind of the author.

It was now about the first of March and we had spent a winter in the sunny South; although this latitude was much milder than in the hoosier State yet, we were poorly prepared to stand the temperature of even a mild climate; the ground never froze more than a half inch yet, we had the bare ground with no covering, and nearly naked; a

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Delightful hoarser blizzard ten degrees below zero, with some of the comforts of life would have been hailed with pleasure.

Since my entrance in Cahaba there had been no sanitary system, we had not even a broom or shovel or any means of sanitary improvement, we were not even supplied with soap, and many of the weak and sick prisoners went for days without washing hands or face, and the vermine was actually eating some of them up alive, yet, my readers are doubtless getting tired of this gasty ~~scene~~ picture, and I will give briefly the closing scene and let the curtain drop over many sad and painful events that I have failed to portray. I had, had now an experience of nearly nine months in Cahaba, and I stood ready to put all in the balance for liberty, the greatest test of physical endurance to which we had yet been subjected was now before us, many of my comrades were to go down under this trial of human endurance which was to add not a few to the great throng that sleep in the sunny south.

We were soon to leave the cruel scenes of the past; yet, many of our comrades we were to leave behind to sleep beneath the southern pines, whose leafy branches have sighed a sad requiem over the

bivouac of the dead for over a quarter of a century. In nameless graves they have slept from hunger and thirst. The brave dead, for whom let me believe there is yet victory in the final great roll call, when the Nations of ^{the} earth shall give up their dead. Though our parting is nigh and many messages are to be borne to the northern homes - many mothers were to be told of how her boys life went out in Cahaba - many fatherless children, were to gather around the hearth, to hear the same sad story of starvation and death. The last dark-omen of death seems hastening, that if possible none may escape.

The very elements of nature seem to be cutting off the last retreat, we hear its mighty rumbling sound amid the lightning flash, surely the flood gates of heaven are opened, the rain descends in torrents, the little rills, and brooks swelled to madness, rush on to mingle their angry waters, with the wild swelling stream that flows by Cahaba. For three days and nights an almost steady down-pour of rain has swollen beyond precedent all streams in that region; the Alabama river could no longer contain within its banks the mad accumulating waters; from its heaving bosom the waters were retreating for room, to the right and to the left; Cahabas streets were submerged and ~~and~~ Cahabas wretched throng, stood knee deep

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in the chilly waters of death; and still the waters raise, the sentinals on the ground beat have retreated to the top of the stockade; the water is now from two to four feet deep throughout the prison and we were two days and nights without food, our water supply which was now so immense was poisoned with the filth from the water closet. Dear readers send your imagination to the rescue of the author, let me leave space here for your own conclusion, the gasty picture begs description, and I shall make no attempt to counterfeit the original scene of anguish and death that is yet fixed in my memory.

On the morning of the beginning of the third day, five hundred of us were taken by boat to Belma, the remainder were taken down the river.

It was near the middle of the day before the five hundred were all on board the boat, the landing was very dangerous and we were taken aboard very slowly, although Belma was only ten miles north, we did not reach there until near sundown, the vast floating obstructions in the river made navigation difficult and dangerous, after arriving at Belma we were marched across the city to a stockade that inclosed about one half acre of ground, it was now dark we were formed into companies and drew about the regular Cahaba rations, although I was in a

starving condition I dropped down on the ground with my meager ration under my head, physical nature demanding sleep rather than food, we had made the last stand against hunger and sleep, we had become indifferent to hope, had lost all interest in existence, I think the stars above us were not so bright that night and much of their distant luster was hidden behind the blue canopy of heaven to shut out the pitiful picture that lay so pale, weak, and quiet, in the tattered blue; many this night within this stockade had laid down to sleep from life into eternity. Then let the bright stars hide from the scene let the angel of death steal quietly within the gloom, and take her victims for ever beyond the dead line.

It is told us in the great book of our Christian religion, "To judge not lest ye be judged" and in this book it is again said, "If thine enemy hunger feed him; If he thirst give him drink; and if naked clothe him." Now a portion of the Southern Confederacy and the author of that book could not be on good terms, for those laws had been annihilated down towards Cahaba. We had been at Selma about five days when late one evening a Confederate officer appeared on top of the stockade and announced that all Federal prisoners of war should get ready

to board the cars early next morning for Meridian. I never learned what the officer meant by getting ready, for we had nothing to get ready, we had no extra wardrobe, or rations to pack.

Meridian was directly between Selma and the Federal line, it could not possibly mean exchange or parole though many of our number were greatly elated by that hope, I had been deceived so often with these reports, that I put little confidence in them; for Meridian was I knew at the junction of another line of railway that might lead us to some other prison ^{no} better than Cahaba. Early next morning we were marched a short distance to the railroad and boarded some old dilapidated flat cars about fifty to the car. That outfit of cars and engine was in no way capable of record breaking in the way of speed, though as one of our boys put it, that train could run a mile in spite of thunder. Yet, this was a change and I was not afraid of running into any thing on this line that could worsen our condition.

I shall never forget that ride it was at that season of the year when the spring was hiding away the effects of the dull winter, and the green tender foliage was building a beautiful bower that stretched away on either side like

a paradise, the wild fragrant flowers, and the sweet song of the birds were enrapturing. This was one portion of the South a little like heaven, that stretched out towards Cahaba like an oasis to welcome the weary hungry throng in tattered blue; going through these beautiful scenes of nature toward the Federal line you could never build brighter visions of hope in the heart or braver than this inspired. We arrived at Meridian just before sundown and was marched into a stockade where we drew the regular Cahaba ration, small indeed compared to a ravenous appetite. The great query that night with us was, whether we were to remain there - take another rail road to some other prison, or continue on towards our lives.

This was settled to our satisfaction the next morning when we were ordered forward towards Vicksburg not by rail, but on foot, yet this made little difference for the time being for it was now evident that we were going to the Federal line, and this was enough, for you could see depicted in every face a grim determination to get there or die. The rail road if it could be called such, from Meridian to Bigblack river had almost been wiped

out of existence, that same John Sherman that had carried victory and left desolation from Atlanta to the sea, had been in the rail road business out towards Meridian, and I doubt think he left enough of this road in sight from Meridian to Bigblack river, for the stock holders to make an assignment on.

We had now a long weary march before us, yet, there was very few stragglers, the ranks were kept very compact, almost a superhuman effort was being put forth in this march for liberty. Falling by the wayside perhaps, men to be taken back to prison and the last resource of physical energy was being put forth, very few of us had any foot ware that could be termed shoes, and I hope my readers will not question the assertion, when I say in all candor and in the light of living truth, that from Meridian to bigblack river you could ~~find~~ mark the trail of that weary band by the blood that constantly stained the rough stony way. Yet, all but very few arrived together on the eastern bank of the bigblack river; I shall never forget the scene I witnessed as this weary army emerged from the timber around a bend that brought us in view of our flag a half mile away on the opposite bank of the river.

yes, there floated the stars and stripes, which were the signal for some physical and mental emotion that you can hardly understand; the remnants of old head gear was in the air, every body felt called upon to take some part in the last act that ushered us into liberty.

Some gave way to tears I saw them standing out on the hollow cheek of many not quite as big as a Cahaba ration, but of finer material.

While we were swimming around in this sea of glory, a Yankee prescription was being prepared to be taken inwardly, and we got our selves on the outside of it, dont eat too much boys was the friendly caution from Federal officers, for the difference between a Cahaba ration and a Federal meal were in comparison like a dose of morphine and a double dose of salts, though hunger has no regard for results, and we did eat, too much and the result was fatal to several.

Well here we are back in the Federal Camp with the commissary department in sight that is full of good things to eat. what a glorious land-slide of liberty and inside filling to the exiles who, had been living on husks, there was singing and dancing in the camp, we had washed off the old Cahaba stain and put on new garments, and had been made whole and were just as near heaven as people can get in this life.

I believe there are some sour Christians that have gone to heaven who were too selfish to enjoy heaven as well as we enjoyed this liberty, and the things it afforded us.

Captain Henderson came through with us to our lines, there never was a Confederate more honored in a Federal camp; we felt that he had been instrumental in bringing us over from Egypt to Canaan, and he was complimented on every hand, though we sent no compliments by him back to Major Jones for they would have been too hot for Henderson to carry. One great inducement for a Cahaba prisoner to keep out of h-l, is the desire never to again come in contact with Jones.

The Christian Commission of Vicksburg sent out reading matter and writing material to parole camp, and letters were written home, and I doubt not that today many of those same old letters faded by time are precious souvenirs in memory of those that were lost from the Steamer Sultana.