



*By Lt Frank E. Moran, U.S.V.*

This article was published in *The Century Co. Magazine*, N.Y., Vol. XXXV, 1888, under the title "*Colonel Rose's tunnel at Libby prison*". It is reproduced with its original formatting, spelling and punctuation.

Among all the thrilling incidents in the history of Libby Prison none exceeds in interest the celebrated tunnel escape which occurred on the night of February 9, 1864. I was one of the 109 Union officers who passed through the tunnel, and one of the ill-fated 48 that were retaken. I and two companions - Lieutenant Charles H. Morgan of the 21<sup>st</sup> Wisconsin regiment, who has since served several terms in Congress from Missouri, and Lieutenant William L. Watson of the same company and regiment - when re-captured by the Confederate cavalry were in sight of the Union picket posts. Strange as it may appear, no accurate and complete account has ever been given to the public of this most ingenious and daring escape made on either side during the civil war. Twelve of the party of fifteen who dug the tunnel are still living, including their leader.

Thomas E. Rose, colonel of the 77<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteers, the engineer and leader in the plot throughout, - now a captain in the 16<sup>th</sup> United States Infantry -, was taken prisoner at the battle of Chickamauga, September 20, 1863. On his way to Richmond he escaped from his guards at Weldon, N.C., but, after a day's wandering about the pine forests with a broken foot, was retaken by a detachment of Confederate cavalry and sent to Libby Prison, Richmond, where he arrived October 1, 1863.

Libby Prison fronts on Carey street, Richmond, and stands upon a hill which descends abruptly to the canal, from which its southern wall is only divided by a street and having a vacant lot on the east. The building was wholly detached, making it a comparatively easy matter to guard the prison securely with a small force and keep every door and window in full view from without. As an additional measure of safety, prisoners were not allowed on the ground-floor, except that in the day-time they were permitted to use the first floor of the middle section for a cook-room. The interior embraced nine large warehouse-rooms 105 feet x 45 feet, with eight feet from each

floor to ceiling, except the upper floor, which gave more room, owing to the pitch of the gable roof. The abrupt slant of the hill gives the building an additional story on the south side. The whole building really embraces three sections, and these were originally separated by heavy blank walls. The Confederates cut doors through the walls of the two upper floors which comprised the prisoners' quarters, and they were thus permitted to mingle freely with each other, but there was no communication whatsoever between the three large rooms on the first floors. Beneath these floors were three cellars of the same dimensions as the rooms above them, and, like them, were divided from each other by massive blank walls. For ready comprehension, let these be designated the east, middle, and west cellars.

Except in the lofts known as "Streight's room" and "Milroy's room", which were occupied by the earliest inmates of Libby in 1863, there was no furniture in the building, and only a few of the early comers possessed such a luxury as an old army blanket or a knife, cup, and tin-plate. As a rule, the prisoner, by the time he reached Libby, found himself devoid of earthly goods save the meager and dust-begrimed summer garb in which he had made his unlucky campaign.

At night the six large lofts presented strange war-pictures, over which a single tallow-candle wept copious and greasy tears that ran down over the petrified loaf of corn-bread, Borden's condensed milk can, or bottle in which it was set, over the petrified loaf of corn-bread, and where it struggled on until "taps," when the guards, with unconscious irony, shouted, "*Lights out!*" at which signal it usually disappeared amid a shower of boots and such other missiles as were at hand. The sleepers covered the six floors, lying in ranks, head to head and foot to foot, like prostrate lines of battle. For the general good, and to preserve something like military precision, these ranks (especially when cold weather compelled them to lie close for better warmth) were subdivided into convenient squares under charge of a "captain," who was invested with authority to see that every man lay "spoon fashion."

No consideration of personal convenience was permitted to interfere with the general comfort of the "squad". Thus, when the hard floor could no longer be endured on the right side, - especially by the thin men, - the captain gave the command, "*Attention, Squad Number Four! Prepare to spoon! One - two - spoon!*" And the whole squad flopped over on the left side.

The first floor on the west of the building was used by the Confederates as an office and for sleeping-quarters for the prison officials, and a stair-way guarded by sentinels led from this to Milroy's room just above it. As before explained, the middle room was shut off from the office by a heavy blank wall. This room, known as the "Kitchen", had two stoves in it, one of which stood about ten feet from the heavy door that opened on Carey street side-walk, and behind the stove was a fire-place. The room contained also several long pine tables with permanent seats attached, such as may be commonly seen at picnic grounds. The floor was constantly inundated here by several defective and overworked water-faucets and a leaky trough.

A stair-way without balusters led up on the south-west end of the floor, above which was a room known as the "Chickamauga room", and chiefly occupied by Chickamauga prisoners. The sentinel who had formerly been placed at this stair-way at night, to prevent the prisoners from entering the kitchen, had been withdrawn when in the fall of 1863, the horrible condition of the floor made it untenable for sleeping purposes.

The uses to which the large ground-floor-room east of the kitchen was put varied during the first two years of the war, but early in October of 1863, and thereafter, it was

permanently used and known as the hospital, and it contained a large number of cots, which were never occupied. An apartment had been made at the north or front of the room, which served as a doctor's office and laboratory. Like those adjoining it on the west, this room had a large door opening on Carey street which was heavily bolted and guarded on the outside.

The arrival of the Chickamauga prisoners greatly crowded the upper floors, and compelled the Confederates to board up a small portion of the east cellar at its south-east corner as an additional cook-room, several large caldrons having been set in a rudely built furnace; so for a short period, the prisoners were allowed down there in the day-time to cook. A stair-way led from this cellar to the room above, which subsequently became the hospital.

Such, in brief, was the condition of things when Colonel Rose arrived at the prison. From the hour of his coming, a means of escape became his constant and eager study; and, with this purpose in view, he made a careful and minute survey of the entire premises.

From the windows of the upper east or "Gettysburg room" he could look across the vacant lot on the east and get a glimpse of the yard between two adjacent buildings which faced the canal and Carey street respectively, and he estimated the intervening space at a about seventy feet. From the south windows he looked out across a street into the canal and James River, running parallel with each a other, the two streams at this point being separated by a low and narrow strip of land. This strip periodically disappeared when protracted seasons of heavy rains came, or when spring floods so rapidly swelled the river that the latter invaded the cellars of Libby. At such s times it was common to see enormous swarms of rats come out from the lower doors and windows of the prison and make head for dry land in swimming platoons amid the cheers of the prisoners in the upper windows. On one or two occasions Rose observed workmen descending from the middle of the south side street into a sewer running through its center and concluded that this sewer must have various openings to the canal both to the east and west of the prison.

The north portion of this cellar contained a large quantity of loose packing straw, covering the floor to an average depth of two feet; and this straw afforded shelter, especially at night, for a large colony of rats, which gave the place the name of "Rat Hell".

In one afternoon's inspection of this dark end Rose suddenly encountered a fellow prisoner, Major A.G. Hamilton, of the 12<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Cavalry. A conflicting friendship followed, and the two men entered at once upon the plan of gaining their liberty. They agreed that the most feasible scheme was a tunnel, to begin in the rear of the little kitchen apartment at the south-east corner of Rat Hell. Without more ado they secured a broken shovel and two case-knives and began operations.

Within a few days the Confederates decided upon certain changes in the prison for the greater security of their captives. A week afterward the cook-room was abandoned, the stair-way nailed up, the prisoners sent to the upper floors, and all communication with the east cellar was cut off. This was a sore misfortune, for this apartment was the only possible base of successful tunnel operations. Colonel Rose now began to study other practicable means of escape, and spent night after night examining the posts and watching the movements of the sentinels on the four sides of Libby. One very dark night, during a howling storm, Rose again unexpectedly met Hamilton in a place where no prisoner could reasonably be looked for at such an hour. For an instant the

impenetrable darkness made it impossible for either to determine whether he had met a friend or foe: neither had a weapon, yet each involuntarily felt for one, and each made ready to spring at the other's throat, when a flash of lightning revealed their identity. The two men had availed themselves of the darkness of the night and the roar of the storm to attempt an escape from a window of the upper west room to a platform that ran along the west outer wall of the prison, from which they hoped to reach the ground and elude the sentinels, whom they conjectured would be crouched in the shelter of some door-way or other partial refuge that might be available; but so vivid and frequent were the lightning flashes, that the attempt was seen to be extremely hazardous.

Rose now spoke of an entrance from the south side street to the middle cellar, having frequently noticed the entrance and exit of workmen at that point, and expressed his belief that if an entrance could be effected to this cellar it would afford them the only chance of slipping past the sentinels.

He hunted up a bit of pine-wood which he whittled into a sort of wedge, and the two men went down into the dark, vacant kitchen directly over this cellar. With the wedge Rose pried a floor-board out of its place, and made an opening large enough to let himself through it. He had never been in this middle cellar, and was wholly ignorant of its contents or whether it was occupied by Confederates or workmen; but as he had made no noise and the place was in profound darkness, he decided to go down and reconnoiter.

He wrenched off one of the long boards that formed a table-seat in the kitchen, and found that it was long enough to touch the cellar base and protrude a foot or so above the kitchen floor. By this means he easily descended, leaving Hamilton to keep watch above.

The storm still raged fiercely, and the faint beams of a street lamp revealed the muffled form of the sentinel slowly pacing his beat and carrying his musket at a "secure" arms. Creeping softly towards him along the cellar wall, he now saw that what he had supposed was a door was simply a naked opening to the street; and further inspection disclosed the fact that there was but one sentinel on the south side of the prison. Standing in the dark shadow, he could easily have touched this man with his hand as he repeatedly passed him. Groping about, he found various appurtenances indicating that the south end of this cellar was used for a carpenter's shop, and that the north end was partitioned off into a series of small cells with padlocked doors, and that through each door a square hole, a foot in diameter, was cut. Subsequently it was learned that these dismal cages were alternately used for the confinement of "troublesome prisoners" - i.e., those who had distinguished themselves by ingenious attempts to escape - and also for runaway slaves, and Union spies under sentence of death.

At the date of Rose's first reconnaissance to this cellar, these cells were vacant and unguarded. The night was now far spent and Rose proceeded to return to the kitchen, where Hamilton was waiting for him.

The very next day a rare good fortune befell Rose. By an agreement between the commissioners of exchange, several bales of clothing and blankets had been sent by our Government to the famishing Union prisoners on Belle Isle, a number of whom had already frozen to death. A committee of Union officers then confined in Libby, consisting of General Neal Dow, Colonel Alexander von Schrader, Lieut.-Colonel Joseph F. Boyd, and Colonel Harry White, having been selected by the Confederates to supervise the distribution of the donations. Colonel White had, by a shrewd bit of

finesse, "confiscated" a fine rope by which one of the bales was tied, and this he now presented to Colonel Rose. It was nearly a hundred feet long, an inch thick, and almost new.

It was hardly dark the following night before Rose and Hamilton were again in the kitchen, and as soon as all was quiet Rose fastened his rope to one of the supporting posts, took up the floor-plank as before, and both men descended to the middle cellar. They were not a little disappointed to discover that where there had been but one sentinel on the south side there were now two. On this and for several nights they contented themselves with sly visits of observation to this cellar, during which Rose found and secreted various tools, among which were a broad-ax, a saw, two chisels, several files, and a carpenter's square. One dark night both men went down and determined to try their luck at passing the guards. Rose made the attempt and succeeded in passing the first man, but unluckily was seen by the second. The latter called lustily for the corporal of the guard, and the first excitedly cocked his gun and peered into the dark door through which Rose swiftly retreated. The guard called, "*Who goes there ?*" but did not enter the dark cellar. Rose and Hamilton mounted the rope and had just succeeded in replacing the plank when the corporal and a file of men entered the cellar with a lantern. They looked into every barrel and under every bench, but no sign of Yankees appeared; and as on this night it happened that several workmen were sleeping in an apartment at the north end, the corporal concluded that the man seen by the sentinel was one of these, notwithstanding their denial when awakened and questioned. After a long parley the Confederates withdrew, and Hamilton and Rose, depressed in spirits, went to bed, and Rose as usual concealed his rope.

Before the week was out they were at it again. On one of these nights Rose suddenly came upon one of the workmen, and, swift as thought, seized the hidden broad-ax with the intention of braining him if he attempted an alarm; but the poor fellow was too much paralyzed to cry out, and when finally he did recover his voice and his wits, it was to beg Rose, "for God's sake," not to come in there again at night. Evidently the man never mentioned the circumstance, for Rose's subsequent visits, which were soon resumed, disclosed no evidence of a discover by the Confederates.

Hamilton agreed with Rose that there remained apparently but one means of escape, and that was by force. To overpower the two sentinels on the south side would have been an easy matter, but how to do it and not alarm the rest of the guard, and in consequence the whole city, was the problem. To secure these sentinels without alarming their comrades on the east, west, and north side of the prison, would require the swift action of several men of nerve acting in concert. Precious time was passing, and possibly further alterations might be decided upon that would shut them off from the middle cellar, as they had already been from their original base of operations. Moreover, a new cause of anxiety now appeared. It soon transpired that their nocturnal prowling and close conferences together had already aroused the belief among many observant prisoners that a plan of escape was afoot, and both men were soon eagerly plied with guarded inquiries, and besought by their questioners to admit them to their confidence.

Hamilton and Rose now decided to organize an escaping party. A number of men were then sworn to secrecy and obedience by Colonel Rose, who was the only recognized leader in all operations that followed. This party soon numbered seventy men. The band was then taken down by Rose in convenient details to the middle cellar or carpenter's shop on many nights, to familiarize each man with the place and with his

special part in the plot, and also to take advantage of any favoring circumstances that might arise.

When all had by frequent visits become familiar with the rendez-vous, Rose and the whole party descended one night with the determination to escape at whatever hazard. The men were assigned to their several stations as usual, and a selected few were placed by the leader close to the entrance, in front of which the sentinel was regularly passing. Rose commanded strict silence, and placed himself near the exit preparatory to giving the signal. It was an exciting moment, and the bravest heart beat fast. A signal came, but not the one they looked for. At the very moment of action, the man whom Rose had left at the floor-opening in the kitchen gave the danger signal! The alert leader had, with consummate care, told every man beforehand that he must never be surprised by this signal, - it was a thing to be counted upon, - and that noise and panic were of all things to be avoided as fatal folly in their operations. As a consequence, when this signal came, Rose quietly directed the men to fall in line and re-ascend to the kitchen rapidly without noise, which they did by the long rope which now formed the easy means of communication from the kitchen to the cellar.

Rose remained below to cover the retreat, and when the last man got up he followed him, replaced the board in the floor, and concealed the rope. He had barely done so when a detail of Confederate guards entered the kitchen from the Carey street door, and, headed by an officer, marched straight in his direction. Meantime the party had disappeared up the stair-way and swiftly made their way over their prostrate comrades' forms to their proper sleeping places. Rose, being the last up, and having the floor to fix, had now no time to disappear like his companions, at least without suspicious haste. He accordingly took a seat at one of the tables, and, putting an old pipe in his mouth, coolly awaited the approach of the Confederates. The officer of the guard came along, swinging his lantern almost in his face, stared at him for a second, and without a remark or a halt marched past him and ascended with his escort to the Chickamauga room. The entrance of a guard and their march around the prison, although afterward common enough after taps, was then an unusual thing, causing much talk among the prisoners, and to the mind of Rose and his fellow-plotters was indicative of aroused suspicion on the part of the Confederates.

The whispering groups of men next day, and the number of his eager questioners, gave the leader considerable concern; and Hamilton suggested, as a measure of safety rather than choice, that some of the mischievous talk of escape would be suppressed by increasing the party. This was acted upon; the men, like the rest, were put under oath by Rose, and the party was thus increased to four hundred and twenty. This force would have been enough to overpower the prison guard in a few minutes, but the swift alarm certain to ensue in the streets and spread like wild-fire over Richmond, the meager information possessed by the prisoners as to the strength and position of the nearest Federal troops, the strongly guarded labyrinth of breastworks that encircled the city, and the easy facilities for instant pursuit at the command of the Confederates, put the success of such an undertaking clearly out of the range of probability, unless, indeed, some unusual favoring contingency should arise, such as the near approach of a co-operating column of Federal cavalry.

Nor was this an idle dream, as the country now knows, for even at this period General Kilpatrick was maturing his plans for that bold expedition for the rescue of the prisoners at Richmond and Belle Isle in which the lamented and heroic young cripple Colonel Ulric Dahlgren, lost his life. Rose saw that a breakout of Libby without such

outside assistance promised nothing but a fruitless sacrifice of life and the savage punishment of the survivors. Hence the project, although eagerly and exhaustively discussed, was prudently abandoned.

All talk of escape by the general crowd now wholly ceased, and the captives resigned themselves to their fate and waited with depressed spirits for the remote contingency of an exchange. The quiet thus gained was Rose's opportunity. He sought Hamilton and told him that they must by some stratagem regain access to Rat Hell, and that the tunnel project must be at once revived. The latter assented to the proposition, and the two began earnestly to study the means of gaining an entrance without discovery into this coveted base of operations.

They could not even get into the room above the cellar they wanted to reach, for that was the hospital, and the kitchen's heavy wall shut them off there from. Neither could they break the heavy wall that divided this cellar from the carpenter's shop, which had been the nightly rendez-vous of the party while the break-out was under consideration, for the breach certainly would be discovered by the workmen or Confederates, some of whom were in there constantly during daylight.

There was, in fact, but one plan by which Rat Hell could be reached without detection, and the conception of this device and its successful execution was due to the stout-hearted Hamilton. This was to cut a hole in the back of the kitchen fire-place; the incision must be just far enough to preserve the opposite or hospital side intact. It must then be cut downward to a point below the level of the hospital floor, then eastward into Rat Hell, the completed opening thus to describe the letter "S". It must be wide enough to let a man through, yet the wall must not be broken on the hospital side above the floor, nor marred on the carpenter's-shop side below it. Such a break would be fatal, for both of these points were conspicuously exposed to the view of the Confederates every hour in the day. Moreover, it was imperatively necessary that all trace of the beginning of the opening should be concealed, not only from the Confederate officials and guards, who were constantly passing the spot every day, but from the hundreds of un-initiated prisoners who crowded around the stove just in front of it from dawn till dark.

Work could only be possible between the hours of 10 at midnight, when the room was generally abandoned by the prisoners because of its inundated condition, and 4 o'clock in the morning, when the earliest risers were again astir. It was necessary to do the work with an old jack-knife and one of the chisels previously secured by Rose. It must be done in darkness and without noise, for a vigilant sentinel paced on the Carey street sidewalk just outside the door and within ten feet of the fire-place. A rubber blanket was procured, and the soot from the chimney carefully swept into it. Hamilton, with his old knife, cut the mortar between the bricks and pried a dozen of them out, being careful to preserve them.

The rest of the incision was made in accordance with the design described, but no conception could have been formed beforehand of the sickening tediousness of cutting an "S" shaped hole through a heavy wall with a feeble old jack-knife, in stolen hours of darkness. Rose guarded his comrade against the constant danger of interruption by alert enemies on one side and by blundering friends on the other; and, as frequently happens in human affairs, their friends gave them more trouble than their foes. Night after night passed, and still the two men got up after taps from their hard beds, and descended to the dismal and reeking kitchen to bore for liberty. When the sentinel's call at Castle Thunder and at Libby announced 4 o'clock, the dislodged bricks were carefully replaced, and the soot previously gathered in the gum blanket was flung in handfuls

against the restored wall, filling the seams so entirely between the bricks as to defy detection. At last, after many weary nights, Hamilton's heroic patience and skill were rewarded, and the way was open to the coveted base of operations, Rat Hell.

Now occurred a circumstance that nearly revealed the plot and nearly ended in a tragedy. When the opening was finished, the long rope was made fast to one of the kitchen supporting posts, and Rose proceeded to descend and reconnoiter. He got partly through with ease, but lost his hold in such a manner that his body slipped through so as to pinion his arms and leave him wholly powerless either to drop lower or return - the bend of the hole being such as to cramp his back and neck terribly and prevent him from breathing. He strove desperately, but each effort only wedged him more firmly in the awful vise. Hamilton sprang to his aid and did his utmost to effect his release; but, powerful as he was, he could not budge him. Rose was gasping for breath and rapidly getting fainter, but even in this fearful strait he refrained from an outcry, that would certainly alarm the guards just outside the door. Hamilton saw that without speedy relief his comrade must soon smother. He dashed through the long dark room up the stairway, over the forms of several hundred men, and disregarding consequences and savage curses in the dark and crowded room, he trampled upon arms, legs, faces, and stomachs, leaving riot and blasphemy in his track among the rudely awakened and now furious lodgers of the Chickamauga room. He sought the sleeping-place of Major George H. Fitzsimmons, but he was missing. He however found Lieutenant F.F. Bennett, of the 18<sup>th</sup> Regulars (since a major in the 9<sup>th</sup> United States Cavalry), to whom he told the trouble in a few hasty words. Both men fairly flew across the room, dashed down the stairs, and by their united efforts, Rose, half-dead and quite speechless, was drawn up from the fearful trap.

Hamilton managed slightly to increase the size of the hole and provide against a repetition of the accident just narrated, and all being now ready, the two men entered eagerly upon the work before them. They appropriated one of the wooden spittoons of the prison, and to each side attached a piece of clothes-line which they had been permitted to have to dry clothes on. Several bits of candle and the larger of the two chisels were also taken to the operating-cellar. They kept this secret well and worked alone for many nights. In fact they would have so continued, but they found that after digging about four feet their candle would go out in the vitiated air. Rose did the digging, and Hamilton fanned air into him with his hat: even then he had to emerge into the cellar every few minutes to breathe. Rose could dig, but needed the light and air; and Hamilton could not fan, and drag out, and deposit the excavated earth, and meantime keep a lookout. In fact, it was demonstrated that there was a slim chance of succeeding without more assistance, and it was decided to organize a party large enough for effective work by reliefs. As a preliminary step, and to afford the means of more rapid communication with the cellar from the fire-place opening, the long rope obtained from Colonel White was formed by Hamilton into a rope-ladder with convenient wooden rungs. This alteration considerably increased its bulk and added to Rose's difficulty in concealing it from curious eyes.

He now made a careful selection of thirteen men beside himself and Hamilton, and bound them by a solemn oath to secrecy and strict obedience. To form this party as he wanted it required some diplomacy, as it was known that the Confederates had, on more than one occasion, sent cunning spies into Libby disguised as Union prisoners, for the detection of any contemplated plan of escape. Unfortunately, the complete list of the names of the party now formed has not been preserved, but among the party, besides

Rose and Hamilton, were Captain John Sterling, 30<sup>th</sup> Indiana; Captain John Lucas 5<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Cavalry; Captain Isaac N. Johnson, 6<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Cavalry; and Lieutenant F. F. Bennett, 18<sup>th</sup> Regulars.

The party being now formed were taken to Rat Hell and their several duties explained to them by Rose, who was invested with full authority over the work in hand. Work was begun in rear of the little kitchen-room previously abandoned at the south-east corner of the cellar. To systematize the labor, the party was divided into squads of five each, which gave the men one night on duty and two off, Rose assigning each man to the branch of work in which experiments proved him the most proficient. He was himself, by long odds, the best digger of the party while Hamilton had no equal for ingenious mechanical skill in contriving helpful little devices to overcome or lessen the difficulties that beset almost every step of the party's progress.

The first plan was to dig down alongside the east wall and under it until it was passed, then turn southward and make for the large street sewer next to the canal and into which Rose had before noticed workmen descending. This sewer was a large one, believed to be fully six feet high, and, if it could be gained, there could be little doubt that an adjacent opening to the canal would be found to the eastward. It was very soon revealed however, that the lower side of Libby was built upon ponderous timbers below which they could not hope to penetrate with their meager stock of tools - such, at least, was the opinion of nearly all the party. Rose nevertheless determined that the effort should be made, and they were soon at work with old pen-knives and case-knives hacked into saws. After infinite labor they at length cut through the great logs, only to be met by an unforeseen and still more formidable barrier. Their tunnel, in fact, had penetrated below the level of the canal. Water began to filter in - feebly at first, but at last it broke in with a rush that came near drowning Rose who barely had time to make his escape. This opening was therefore plugged up; and to do this rapidly and leave no dangerous traces put the party to their wit's end.

An attempt was next made to dig into a small sewer that ran from the south-east corner of the prison into the main sewer. After a number of nights of hard labor, this opening was extended to a point below a brick furnace in which were encased several caldrons. The weight of this furnace caused a cave-in near the sentinel's path outside the prison wall. Next day, a group of officers were seen eying the break curiously. Rose, listening at a window above, heard the word "rats" repeated by them several times and took comfort. The next day he entered the cellar alone, and felt that if the suspicion of the Confederates were really awakened a trap would be set for him in Rat Hell, and determined, if such were really the case, that he would be the only victim caught. He therefore entered the little partitioned corner room with some anxiety, but there was no evidence of a visit by the guards, and his spirits again rose.

The party now assembled, and an effort was made to get into the small sewer that ran from the cook-room to the big sewer which Rose was so eager to reach; but soon it was discovered, to the utter dismay of the weary party, that this wood-lined sewer was too small to let a man through it. Still it was hoped by Rose that by removing the plank with which it was lined the passage could be made. The spirits of the party were by this time considerably dashed by their repeated failures and sickening work; but the undaunted Rose, aided by Hamilton, persuaded the men to another effort, and soon the knives and toy saws were at work again with vigor. The work went on so swimmingly that it was confidently believed that an entrance to the main sewer would be had on the night of January 26, 1864.

On the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> two men had been left down in Rat Hell to cover any remaining traces of a tunnel, and when light came again it was expected that all would be ready for the escape between 8 and 9 o'clock the following night. Meantime, the two men were to enter and make careful examination of the main sewer and its adjacent outlets. The party, which was now in readiness for its march for the Federal camps, waited tidings from these two men all next day in tormenting anxiety, and the weary hours went by on leaden wings. At last the sickening word came that the planks yet to be removed before they could enter the main sewer were of seasoned oak - hard as bone, and three inches thick. Their feeble tools were now worn out or broken; they could no longer get air to work or keep a light in the horrible pit which was reeking with cold mud; in short, any attempt at further progress, with the utensils at hand, was foolish.

Most of the party were now really ill from the foul stench in which they had lived so long. The visions of liberty that had first lured them to desperate efforts under the inspiration of Rose and Hamilton had at last faded, and one by one they lost heart and hope and frankly told Colonel Rose that they could do no more. The party was therefore disbanded, and the yet sanguine leader, with Hamilton for his sole helper, continued the work alone. Up to this time thirty-nine nights had been spent in the work of excavation. The two men now made a careful examination of the north-east corner of the cellar, at which point the earth's surface outside the prison wall, being eight or nine feet higher than at the canal or south side, afforded a better place to dig than a latter being free from water and with clay-top enough to support itself. The unfavorable feature of this point was that the only possible terminus of a tunnel was a yard between the buildings beyond the vacant lot on the east of Libby. Another objection was that, even when the tunnel should be made to that point, the exit of any escaping party must be made through an arched wagon-way under the building that faced the street on the canal side, and every man must emerge on the sidewalk in sight of the sentinel on the south side of the prison, the intervening space being in the full glare of a gas-lamp. It was carefully noted however by Rose, long before this, that the west end of the beat of the nearest sentinel was between fifty and sixty feet from the point of egress, and it was concluded that by walking away at the moment the sentinel commenced his pace westward, one would be far enough into the shadow to make it improbable that the color of his clothing could be made out by the sentinel when he faced about to return towards the eastern end of his beat, which terminated ten to fifteen feet east of the prison wall. It was further considered that as these sentinels had for their special duty the guarding of the prison, they would not be eager to burden themselves with duty of molesting persons seen in the vicinity outside of their jurisdiction, provided, of course, that the retreating forms - many of which they must certainly see - were not recognized as Yankees. All others, they might properly leave for the challenge and usual examination of the provost guard who patrolled the streets of Richmond.

The wall of that east cellar had to be broken in three places before a place was found where the earth was firm enough to support a tunnel. The two men worked on with stubborn patience, but their progress was painfully slow. Rose dug assiduously, and Hamilton alternately fanned air to his comrade and dragged out and hid the excavated dirt, but the old difficulty confronted him. The candle would not burn, the air could not be fanned fast enough with a hat and the dirt hidden, without better contrivances or additional help.

Rose now reassembled the party and selected from them a number who were willing to renew the attempt<sup>1</sup>. Against the east wall stood a series of stone fenders abutting inward, and these, being at uniform intervals of about twenty feet, cast deep shadows that fell towards the prison front. In one of these dark recesses the wall was pierced, well up towards the Carey street end. The earth here had very densely compressed sand, that offered a strong resistance to the broad-bladed chisel, which was their only effective implement, and it was clear that a long turn of hard work must be done to penetrate under the fifty-foot lot to the objective point. The lower part of the tunnel was about six inches above the level of the cellar floor, and its top about two and a half feet. Absolute accuracy was of course impossible, either in giving the hole a perfectly horizontal direction or in preserving uniform dimensions; but a fair level was preserved, and the average diameter of the tunnel was a little over two feet. Usually one man would dig, and fill the spitoon with earth; upon the signal of a gentle pull, an assistant would drag the load into the cellar by the clothes-lines fastened to each side of this box, and then hide it under the straw; a third constantly fanned air into the tunnel with a rubber blanket stretched across a frame, the invention of the ingenious Hamilton; a fourth would give occasional relief to the last two; while a fifth would keep a lookout.

The danger of discovery was continual, for the guards were under instructions from the prison commandant to make occasional visits to every accessible part of the building; so that it was not unusual for a sergeant and several men to enter the south door of Rat Hell in the day-time, while the diggers were at labor in the dark north end. During these visits the digger would watch the intruders with his head sticking out of the tunnel, while the others would crouch behind the low stone fenders or crawl quickly under the straw. This was, however, so uninviting a place, that the Confederates made this visit as brief as a nominal compliance with their orders permitted, and they did not often venture into the dark north end. The work was fearfully monotonous, and the more so because absolute silence was commanded, the men moving about mutely in the dark. The darkness caused them frequently to become bewildered and lost; and as Rose could not call out for them, he had often to hunt all over the big dungeon to gather them up and pilot them to their places.

The difficulty of forcing air to the digger, whose body nearly filled the tunnel, increased as the hole was extended, and compelled the operator to back into the cellar often for air, and for air that was itself foul enough to sicken a strong man.

But they were no longer harassed with the water and timbers that had impeded their progress at the south end. Moreover, experience was daily making each man more proficient in the work. Rose urged them on with cheery enthusiasm, and their hopes rose high, for already they had penetrated beyond the sentinels' beat and were nearing the goal. The party off duty kept a cautious lookout from the upper east windows for any indication of suspicion on the part of the Confederates. In this extreme caution was necessary, both to avert the curiosity of prisoners in those east rooms and to keep out of the range of bullets from the guards, who were under a standing order to fire at a head if

---

<sup>1</sup> The party now consisted of Colonel Thomas E. Rose, 77<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania; Major A. G. Hamilton, 12<sup>th</sup> Kentucky; Captain Terrance Clark, 79<sup>th</sup> Illinois; Major George H. Fitzsimmons, 30<sup>th</sup> Indiana; Captain John F. Gallagher, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ohio; Captain W. S. B. Randall, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ohio; Captain John Lucas, 5<sup>th</sup> Kentucky; Captain I. N. Johnson, 5<sup>th</sup> Kentucky; Major B.B. McDonald, 101<sup>st</sup> Ohio; Lieutenant N.S. McKean, 21<sup>st</sup> Illinois; Lieutenant David Garbett, 77<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania; Lieutenant J.C. Fislar, 7<sup>th</sup> Indiana Artillery; Lieutenant John D. Simpson, 10<sup>th</sup> Indiana; Lieutenant John Mitchell, 79<sup>th</sup> Illinois and Lieutenant Eli Foster, 30<sup>th</sup> Indiana. This party was divided into three reliefs, as before, and the work of breaking the cellar wall was successfully done the first night by McDonald and Clark.

seen at a window, or at a hand if placed on the bars that secured them. A sentinel's bullet one day cut a hole in the ear of Lieutenant Hammond; another officer was wounded in the face by a bullet, which fortunately first splintered against one of the window-bars; and a captain of an Ohio regiment was shot through the head and instantly killed while reading a newspaper. He was violating no rule whatever, and when shot, was from eight to ten feet inside the window through which the bullet came. This was a wholly unprovoked and wanton murder; the cowardly miscreant had fired the shot while he was off duty, and from the north sidewalk of Carey street. The guards (home guards they were) used, in fact, to gun for prisoners' heads from their posts below pretty much after the fashion of boys after squirrels; and the whiz of a bullet through the windows became too common an occurrence to occasion remark unless some one was shot.

Under a standing rule, the twelve hundred prisoners were counted twice each day, the first count being made about 9 in the morning, and the last about 4 in the afternoon. This duty was habitually done by the clerk of the prison, E. W. Ross, a civilian employed by the commandant. He was christened by the prisoners, by reason of his diminutive size, "Little Ross."<sup>2</sup> Ross was generally attended by either "Dick" Turner, Adjutant Latouche, or Sergeant George Stansil, of the 18<sup>th</sup> Georgia, with a small guard to keep the prisoners in four closed ranks during the count. The commandant of the prison, Major Thomas P. Turner (no relative of Dick's), seldom came upstairs.

To conceal the absence of the five men who were daily at work at the tunnel, their comrades of the party off digging duty resorted, under Rose's supervision, to a device of "repeating." This scheme, which was of vital importance to hoodwink the Confederates and avert mischievous curiosity among the uninformed prisoners, was a hazardous business that severely taxed the ingenuity and strained the nerve of the leader and his coadjutors. The manner of the fraud varied with circumstances, but in general it was worked by five of Rose's men, after being counted at or near the head of the line, stooping down and running towards the foot of the ranks, where a few moments later they were counted a second time, thus making Ross's book balance. The whole five, however, could not always do this undiscovered, and perhaps but three of the number could repeat. These occasional mishaps threatened to dethrone the reason of the puzzled clerk; but in the next count the "repeaters" would succeed in their game, and for the time all went well until one day some of the prisoners took it into their heads, "just for the fun of the thing", to imitate the "repeaters". Unconscious of the curses that the party were mentally hurling at them, the meddlers' sole purpose was to make "Little Ross" mad. In this they certainly met with signal success, for the reason of the mystified clerk seemed to totter as he repeated the count over and over in the hope of finding out how one careful count would show that three prisoners were missing and the next an excess of fifteen. Finally Ross, lashed into uncontrollable fury by the sarcastic remarks of his employers and the heartless merriment of the grinning Yanks before him, poured forth his goaded soul as follows: "*Now, gentlemen, look yere: I can count a hundred as good as any blank man in this yere town, but I'll be blank blanked if I can count a hundred of you blanked Yankees. Now gentlemen, there's one thing sho, there's eight or ten of you-uns- yere that ain't yere!*"

This extraordinary accusation "brought down the house", and the Confederate officers and guards, and finally Ross himself, were caught by the resistless contagion of laughter that shook the rafters of Libby.

<sup>2</sup> "Little Ross" was burned to death with other guests at the Spotswood House, Richmond, in 1873.

The officials somehow found a balance that day on the books and the danger was for this once over, to the infinite relief of Rose and his anxious comrades. But the Confederates appeared dissatisfied with something, and came upstairs next morning with more officers and with double the usual number of guards; and some of these were now stationed about the room so as to make it next to impossible to work the repeating device successfully. On this day, for some reason, there were but two men in the cellar and these were Major B. B. McDonald and Captain I. N. Johnson.

The count begun as usual, and, despite the guard in rear, two of the party attempted the repeating device by forcing their way through the center of the ranks towards the left; but the "fun of the thing" had now worn out with the unsuspecting meddlers, who resisted the passage of the two men. This drew the attention of the Confederate officers, and the repeaters were threatened with punishment. The result was inevitable, the count showed two missing: it was carefully repeated, with the same result. To the dismay of Rose and his little band, the prison register was now brought upstairs and a long, tedious roll-call by name was endured, each man passing through a narrow door as his name was called, and between a line of guards.

No stratagem that Rose could now invent could avert the discovery by the Confederates that McDonald and Johnson had disappeared, and the mystery of their departure would be almost certain to cause an inquiry and investigation that would put their plot in peril and probably reveal it.

At last, the "J's" were reached and the name of I. N. Johnson was lustily shouted and repeated, with no response. The roll-call proceeded until the name of B.B. McDonald was reached. To the increasing amazement of everybody but the conspirators, he also had vanished. A careful note was taken of these two names by the Confederates, and a thousand tongues were now busy with the names of the missing men and their singular disappearance.

The conspirators were in a tight place, and must choose between two things. One was for the men in the cellar to return that night and face the Confederates with the most plausible explanation of their absence that they could invent, and the other alternative was the revolting one of remaining in their horrible-abode until the completion of the tunnel.

When night came the fire-place was opened, and the unlucky pair were informed of the situation of affairs and asked to choose between the alternatives presented. McDonald decided to return and face the music; but Johnson, doubtful if the Confederates would be hoodwinked by any explanation, voted to remain where he was and wait for the finish of the tunnel.

As was anticipated, McDonald's return awakened almost as much curiosity among the inhabitants of Libby as his disappearance, and he was soon called to account by the Confederates. He told them he had fallen asleep in an out-of-the-way place in the upper west room, where the guards must have overlooked him during the roll-call of the day before. McDonald was not further molested. The garrulous busybodies, who were Rose's chief dread, told the Confederate officials that they had certainly slept near Johnson the night before the day he was missed. Lieutenant J.C. Fislar (of the working-party), who also slept next to Johnson, boldly declared this a case of mistaken identity, and confidently expressed his belief to both Confederates and Federals who gathered around him that Johnson had escaped and was by this time, no doubt, safe in the Union lines. To this he added the positive statement that Johnson had not been in his accustomed sleeping place for a good many nights. The busybodies, who had indeed

told the truth, looked at the speaker in speechless amazement, but reiterated their statements. But others of the conspirators took Fislar's bold cue and stoutly corroborated him.

Johnson was, of course, nightly fed by his companions, and gave them such assistance as he could at the work; but it soon became apparent that a man could not long exist in such a continuously pestilential atmosphere. How long were the days and nights the poor fellow passed among the squealing rats no tongue can tell - the sickening air, the deathly chill, the horrible, interminable darkness. One day out of three was an ordeal for the workers, who at least had a rest of two days afterward. As a desperate measure of relief it was arranged, with the utmost caution, that late each night Johnson should come upstairs, when all was dark and the prison in slumber, and sleep among the prisoners until just before the time for closing the fire-place opening about 4 o'clock each morning. As he spoke to no one and the room was dark, his presence was never known, even to those who lay next to him; and indeed he listened to many earnest conversations between his neighbors regarding his wonderful disappearance.<sup>3</sup>

As a matter of course, the incidents above narrated made day-work on the tunnel too hazardous to be indulged in, on account of the increased difficulty of accounting for absentees, but the party continued the night-work with unabated industry.

When the opening had been extended nearly across the lot, some of the party believed they had entered under the yard which was the intended terminus; and one night when McDonald was the digger, so confident was he that the desired distance had been made, that he turned his direction upward, and soon broke through to the surface. A glance showed him his nearly fatal blunder, against which, indeed, he had been earnestly warned by Rose, who from the first had carefully estimated the intervening distance between the east wall of Libby and the terminus. In fact, McDonald saw that he had broken through in the open lot which was all in full view of a sentinel who was dangerously close. Appalled by what he had done, he retreated to the cellar and reported to his companions the disaster. Believing that discovery was now certain, the party sent one of their number up the rope to report to Rose, who was asleep. The hour was about midnight when the leader learned of the mischief. He quickly got up, went down cellar, entered the tunnel, and examined the break. It was not so near the sentinel's path as McDonald's excited report indicated, and fortunately the breach was at a point whence the surface sloped downward towards the east. He took off his blouse and stuffed it into the opening, pulling the dirt over it noiselessly, and in a few minutes there was little surface evidence of the hole. He then backed into the cellar in the usual crab fashion, and gave the directions for the required depression of the tunnel and vigorous resumption of the work. The hole made in the roof of the tunnel was not much larger than a rat hole, and could not be seen from the prison. But the next night Rose shoved an old shoe out of the hole, and the day afterward he looked down through the prison-bars and saw the shoe lying where he had placed it, and judged from its position that he had better incline the direction of the tunnel slightly to the left.

Meantime Captain Johnson was dragging out a wretched existence in Rat Hell, and for safety was obliged to confine himself by day to the dark north end, for the Confederates often came into the place very suddenly through the south entrance. When they ventured too close, Johnson would get into a pit that he had dug under the straw as

---

<sup>3</sup> In a volume entitled "*Four Months in Libby*", Captain Johnson has related his experience at this time, and his subsequent escape.

a hiding-hole both for himself and the tunnelers' tools, and quickly cover himself with a huge heap of short packing straw. A score of times he came near being stepped upon by the Confederates, and more than once the dust of the straw compelled him to sneeze in their very presence.

On Saturday, February 6, a larger party than usual of the Confederates came into the cellar, walked by the very mouth of the tunnel, and seemed to be making a critical survey of the entire place. They remained an unusually long time and conversed in low tones; several of them even kicked the loose straw about; and in fact everything seemed to indicate to Johnson - who was the only one of the working party now in the cellar - that the long averted discovery had been made. That night he reported matters fully to Rose at the fire-place opening.

The tunnel was now nearly completed, and when Rose conveyed Johnson's message to the party, it caused dismay. Even the stout-hearted Hamilton was for once excited, and the leader whose unflinching fortitude had thus far inspired his little band had his brave spirits dashed. But his buoyant courage rose quickly to its high and natural level. He could not longer doubt that the suspicions of the Confederates were aroused, but he felt convinced that these suspicions had not as yet assumed such a definite shape as most of his companions thought; still, he had abundant reason to believe that the success of the tunnel absolutely demanded its speedy completion, and he now firmly resolved that a desperate effort should be made to that end. Remembering that the next day was Sunday, and that it was not customary for the Confederates to visit the operating-cellar on that day, he determined to make the most in his power of the now precious time. He therefore caused all the party to remain upstairs, directing them to keep a close watch upon the Confederates from all available points of observation, to avoid being seen in whispering groups, - in short, to avoid all things calculated to excite the curiosity of friends or suspicion of enemies, - and to await his return.

Taking McDonald with him, he went down through the fire-place before day-light on Sunday morning, and, bidding Johnson to keep a vigilant watch for intruders and McDonald to fan air into him, he entered the tunnel and began the forlorn hope. From this time forward he never once turned over the chisel to a relief.

All day long he worked with the tireless patience of a beaver. When night came, even his single helper, who performed the double duty of fanning air and hiding the excavated earth, was ill from his hard, long task and the deadly air of the cellar. Yet this was as nothing compared with the fatigue of the duty that Rose had performed; and when at last, far into the night, he backed into the cellar, he had scarcely strength enough to stagger across to the rope-ladder.

He had made more than double the distance that had been accomplished under the system of reliefs on any previous day, and the non-appearance of the Confederates encouraged the hope that another day, without interruption, would see the work completed. He therefore determined to refresh himself by a night's sleep for the finish. The drooping spirits of his party were revived by the report of his progress and his unalterable confidence.

Monday morning dawned, and the great prison with its twelve hundred captives was again astir. The general crowd did not suspect the suppressed excitement and anxiety of the little party that waited through that interminable day, which they felt must determine the fate of their project.

Rose had repeated the instructions of the day before, and again descended to Rat Hell with McDonald for his only helper. Johnson reported all quiet, and McDonald taking up

his former duties at the tunnel's mouth, Rose once more entered with his chisel. It was now the seventeenth day since the present tunnel was begun, and he resolved it should be the last. Hour after hour passed, and still the busy chisel was plied, and still the little wooden box with its freight of earth made its monotonous trips from the digger to his comrade and back again.

From the early morning of Monday, February 8, until an hour after midnight the next morning his work went on. As midnight approached, Rose was nearly a physical wreck; the perspiration dripped from every pore of his exhausted body; food he could not have eaten if he had it. His labors thus far had given him a somewhat exaggerated estimate of his physical powers. The sensation of fainting was strange to him, but his staggering senses warned him that to faint where he was meant at once his death and burial. He could scarcely inflate his lungs with the poisonous air of the pit; his muscles quivered with increasing weakness and the warning spasmodic tremor which their unnatural strain induced; his head swam like that of a drowning person.

By midnight he had struck and passed beyond a post which he felt must be in the yard. During the last few minutes he had turned his course upward, and to relieve his cramped limbs he turned upon his back. His strength was nearly gone: the feeble stream of air which his comrade was trying, with all his might, to send to him from a distance of fifty-three feet could no longer reach him through the deadly stench. His senses reeled; he had no breath nor strength enough to retreat backward through his narrow grave. In the agony of suffocation he dropped the dull chisel and beat his two fists against the roof of his grave with the might of despair - when, blessed boon! the crust gave way and the loosened earth showered upon his dripping face, purple with agony; his famished eye caught sight of a radiant star in the blue vault above him; a flood of light and a volume of cool, delicious air poured over him. At that very instant the sentinel's cry rang out like a prophecy - "*Half-past one, and all's well!*"

Recovering quickly under the inspiring air, he dragged his body out of the hole and made a careful survey of the yard in which he found himself. He was under a shed with a board fence between him and the east-side sentinels, and the gable end of Libby loomed grimly against the blue sky. He found the wagon-way under the south-side building closed from the street by a gate fastened by a swinging bar, which, after a good many efforts, he succeeded in opening. This was the only exit to the street. As soon as the nearest sentinel's back was turned he stepped out and walked quickly to the east. At the first corner he turned north, carefully avoiding the sentinel in front of the "Pemberton Buildings" (another military prison north-east of Libby), and at the corner above this he went westward, then south to the edge of the canal, and thus, by cautious moving, made a minute examination of Libby from all sides.

Having satisfied his desires, he retraced his steps to the yard. He hunted up an old bit of heavy plank, crept back into the tunnel, feet first, drew the plank over the opening to conceal it from the notice of any possible visitors to the place, and crawled back to Rat Hell. McDonald was overjoyed, and poor Johnson almost wept with delight as Rose handed one of them his victorious old chisel and gave the other some trifle he had picked up in the outer world as a token that the Underground Railroad to God's Country was open.

Rose now climbed the rope-ladder, drew it up, rebuilt the fire-place wall as usual, and, finding Hamilton, took him over near one of the windows and broke the news to him. The brave fellow was almost speechless with delight, and, quickly hunting up the

rest of the party, told them that Colonel Rose wanted to see them down in the dining-room.

As they had been waiting news from their absent leader with feverish anxiety for what had seemed to them all the longest day in their lives, they instantly responded to the call and flocked around Rose a few minutes later in the dark kitchen where he waited them. As yet they did not know what news he brought they could scarcely wait for him to speak out; and when he announced, "*Boys, the tunnel is finished*", they could hardly repress a cheer. They wrung his hand again and again, and danced about with childish joy.

It was now nearly 3 o'clock in the morning. Rose and Hamilton were ready to go out at once, and indeed were anxious to do so, since everyday of late had brought some new peril to their plans. None of the rest, however, were ready; and all urged the advantage of having a whole night in which to escape through and beyond the Richmond fortifications instead of the few hours of darkness which now preceded the day. To this proposition Rose and Hamilton somewhat reluctantly assented. It was agreed that each man of the party should have the privilege of taking one friend into his confidence, and that the second party of fifteen thus formed should be obligated not to follow the working party out of the tunnel until an hour had elapsed. Colonel H.C. Hobart, of the 21<sup>st</sup> Wisconsin was deputed to see that the programme was observed. He was to draw up the rope-ladder, hide it, and rebuild the wall; and the next night was himself to lead out the second party, deputing some trustworthy leader to follow with still another party on the third night; and thus it was to continue until as many as possible should escape.

On Tuesday evening, February 9, at 7 o'clock, Colonel Rose assembled his party in the kitchen, and, posting himself at the fire-place, waited until the last man went down. He bade Colonel Hobart good-by, went down the hole, and waited until he had heard his comrade pull up the ladder and finally heard him replace the bricks in the fire-place and depart. He now crossed Rat Hell to the entrance into the tunnel, and placed the party in the order in which they were to go out. He gave each a parting caution, thanked his brave comrades for their faithful labors, and, feelingly shaking their hands, bade them God-speed and farewell.

He entered the tunnel first with Hamilton next, and was promptly followed by the whole party through the tunnel and into the yard. He opened the gate leading towards the canal and signaled the party that all was clear. Stepping out on the sidewalk as soon as the nearest sentinel's back was turned, he walked briskly down the street to the east, and a square below was joined by Hamilton. The others followed at intervals of a few minutes, and disappeared in various directions in groups usually of three.

The plan agreed upon between Colonel Rose and Hobart was frustrated by information of the party's departure leaking out; and before 9 o'clock the knowledge of the existence of the tunnel and of the departure of the first party was flashed over the crowded prison, which was soon a convention of excited and whispering men. Colonel Hobart made a brave effort to restore order, but the frenzied crowd that now fiercely struggled for precedence at the fire-place was beyond human control.

Some of them had opened the fire-place and were jumping down like sheep into the cellar one after another. The Colonel implored the maddened men at least to be quiet, and put the rope-ladder in position and escaped himself.

My companion, Sprague, was already asleep when I lay down that night; but my other companion, Duenkel, who had been hunting for me, was very much awake, and seizing me by the collar, he whispered excitedly the fact that Colonel Rose had gone out at the

head of a party through a tunnel. For a brief moment the appalling suspicion that my friend's reason had been dethroned by illness and captivity swept over my mind; but a glance towards the window at the east end showed a quiet but apparently excited group of men from other rooms, and I now observed that several of them were bundled up for a march. The hope of regaining liberty thrilled me like a current of electricity. Looking through the window I could see the escaping men appear one by one on the sidewalk below opposite the exit-yard, and silently disappear and without hindrance or challenge by the prison sentinels. While I was eagerly surveying this scene, I lost track of Duenkel, who had gone in search of further information, but ran against Lieutenant Wilcox, of the 1st New York, whom I knew, and who appeared to have the "tip" regarding the tunnel. Wilcox and I agreed to unite our fortunes in their escape. My shoes were nearly worn out and my clothes were thin and ragged. I was ill prepared for a journey in mid-winter through the enemy's country: happily I had my old overcoat, and this I put on. I had not a crumb of food saved up, as did those who were posted; but as I was ill at the time, my appetite was feeble.

Wilcox and I hurried to the kitchen, where we found several hundred men struggling to be first at the opening in the fire-place. We took our places behind them and soon two hundred more closed us tightly in the mass. The room was pitch dark and the sentinel could be seen through the door-cracks, within a dozen feet of us. The fight for precedence was savage, though no one spoke; but now and then fainting men begged to be released. They begged in vain: certainly some of them must have been permanently injured. For my own part, when I neared the stove I was nearly suffocated; but I took heart when I saw but three more men between me and the hole. At this moment a sound as of tramping feet was heard, and some idiot on the outer edge of the mob startled us with the cry "*The guards, the guards!*" A fearful panic ensued, and the entire crowd bounded towards the stair-way leading up to their sleeping-quarters. The stair-way was unbanistered, and some of the men were forced off the edge and fell on those beneath. I was among the lightest in that crowd; and when it broke and expanded I was taken off my feet, dashed to the floor senseless, my head and one of my hands bruised and cut, and my shoulder painfully injured by the boots of the men who rushed over me. When I gathered my swimming wits I was lying in a pool of water. The room seemed darker than before; and, to my grateful surprise, I was alone. I was now convinced that it was a false alarm and quickly resolved to avail myself of the advantage of having the whole place to myself. I entered the cavity feet first, but found it necessary to remove my overcoat and push it through the opening, and it fell in the darkness below.

I had now no comrade, having lost Wilcox in the stampede. Rose and his party, being the first out, were several hours on their journey; and I burned to be away, knowing well that my salvation depended on my passage beyond the city defenses before the pursuing guards were on our trail, when the inevitable discovery should come at roll-call. The fact that I was alone I regretted; but I had served with McClellan in the Peninsula campaign of 1862, I knew the country well from my frequent inspection of war maps, and the friendly North Star gave me my bearings. The rope-ladder had either become broken or disarranged, but it afforded me a short hold at the top; so I balanced myself, trusted to fortune, and fell into Rat Hell, which was a rayless pit of darkness, swarming with squealing, rats, several of which I must have killed in my fall. I felt a troop of them run over my face and hands before I could regain my feet. Several times I put my hand on them, and once I flung one from my shoulder. Groping around, I found a stout stick or stave, put my back to the wall, and beat about me blindly but with vigor.

In spite of the hurried instructions given me by Wilcox, I had a long and horrible hunt over the cold surface of the cellar walls in my efforts to find the entrance to the tunnel; and in two minutes after I began feeling my way with my hands I had no idea in what part of the place was the point where I had fallen: my bearings were completely lost, and I must have made the circuit of Rat Hell several times. At my entrance the rats seemed to receive me with cheers sufficiently hearty, I thought, but my vain efforts to find egress seemed to kindle anew their enthusiasm. They had received large reinforcements, and my march around was now greeted with deafening squeaks. Finally, my exploring hands fell upon a pair of heels which vanished at my touch. Here at last was the narrow road to freedom! The heels proved to be the property of Lieutenant Charles H. Morgan, 21<sup>st</sup> Wisconsin, a Chickamauga prisoner. Just ahead of him in the tunnel was Lieutenant William L. Watson, of the same company and regiment. With my cut hand and bruised shoulder the passage through the cold, narrow grave was indescribably horrible, and when I reached the terminus in the yard I was sick and faint. The passage seemed a mile long; but the crisp, pure air and first glimpse of freedom, the sweet sense of being outdoors, and the realization that I had taken the first step towards liberty and home, had a magical effect in my restoration .

I have related before, in a published reminiscence<sup>4</sup>, my experience and that of my two companions above named in the journey towards the Union lines, and our recapture, but the more important matter relating to the plot itself has never been published. This is the leading motive of this article, and therefore I will not intrude the details of my personal experience into this narrative. It is enough to say that it was a chapter of hair-breadth escapes, hunger, cold, suffering, and, alas! failure. We were run down and captured in a swamp several miles north of Charlottesville, and when we were taken our captors pointed out to us the smoke over a Federal outpost. We were brought back to Libby and put in one of the dark, narrow dungeons. I was afterwards confined in Macon, Georgia; Charleston and Columbia, South Carolina; and in Charlotte, North Carolina. After a captivity of just a year and eight months, during which I had made five escapes and was each time retaken, I was at last released on March 1, 1865, at Wilmington, North Carolina.

Great was the panic in Libby when the next morning's roll revealed to the astounded Confederates that 109 of their captives were missing; and as the fire-place had been rebuilt by someone and the opening of the hole in the yard had been covered by the last man who went out, no human trace guided the keepers towards a solution of the mystery. The Richmond papers having announced the "miraculous" escape of 109 Yankee officers from Libby, curious crowds flocked thither for several days until some one, happening to remove the plank in the yard, revealed the tunnel. A terrified negro was driven into the hole at the point of the bayonet, and thus made a trip to Rat Hell that nearly turned him white.

Several circumstances at this time combined to make this escape peculiarly exasperating to the Confederates. In obedience to repeated appeals from the Richmond newspapers, iron bars had but recently been fixed in all the prison windows for better security, and the guard had been considerably reinforced. The columns of these same journals had just been aglow with accounts of the daring and successful escape of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Philadelphia Times, Oct. 28, 1882.

Confederate General John Morgan and his companions from the Columbus, Ohio, jail. Morgan had arrived in Richmond on the 8th of January, exactly a month prior to the completion of the tunnel, and was still the lion of the Confederate capital.

At daylight a plank was seen suspended on the outside of the east wall; this was fastened by a blanket-rope to one of the window-bars and was, of course, a trick to mislead the Confederates. General John H. Winder, then in charge of all the prisoners in the Confederacy, with his headquarters in Richmond, was furious when the news reached him. After a careful external examination of the building, and a talk, not of the politest kind, with Major Turner, he reached the conclusion that such an escape had but one explanation - the guards had been bribed. Accordingly, the sentinels on duty were marched off under arrest to Castle Thunder, where they were locked up and searched for "greenbacks". The thousand and more prisoners still in Libby were compensated, in a measure, for their failure to escape by the panic they saw among the "Rebs". Messengers and dispatches were soon flying in all directions, and all the horse, foot, and dragoons of Richmond were in pursuit of the fugitives before noon. Only one man of the whole escaping party was retaken inside of the city limits<sup>5</sup>. Of the 109 who got out that night 59 reached the Union lines, 48 were recaptured, and 2 were drowned.

Colonel Straight and several other officers who had been chosen by the diggers of the tunnel to follow them out, in accordance with the agreement already referred to, lay concealed for a week in a vacant house, where they were fed by loyal friends, and escaped to the Federal lines when the first excitement had abated.

After leaving Libby, Rose and Hamilton turned northward and cautiously walked on a few squares, when suddenly they encountered some Confederates who were guarding a military hospital. Hamilton retreated quickly and ran off to the east; but Rose, who was a little in advance, walked boldly by on the opposite walk and was not challenged, and thus the two friends separated.

Hamilton, after several days of wandering and fearful exposure, came joyfully upon a Union picket squad, and received the care he painfully needed and was soon on his happy journey home.

Rose passed out of the city of Richmond to the York River Railroad, and followed its track to the Chickahominy bridge. Finding this guarded, he turned to the right, and, as the day was breaking, he came upon a camp of Confederate cavalry. His blue uniform made it exceedingly dangerous to travel in daylight in this region; and seeing a large sycamore log that was hollow, he crawled into it. The February air was keen and biting, but he kept his cramped position until late in the afternoon, and all day he could hear the loud talk in the camp and the neighing of the horses. Towards night he came cautiously forth, and finding the Chickahominy fordable within a few hundred yards, he succeeded in wading across: the uneven bed of the river, however, led him into several deep holes, and before he reached the shore his scanty raiment was thoroughly soaked. He trudged on through the woods as fast as his stiffened limbs would bear him, borne up by the hope of early deliverance, and made a brave effort to shake off the horrible ague. He had not gone far, however, when he found himself again close to some Confederate cavalry, and was compelled once more to seek a hiding-place. The day seemed of interminable length, and he tried vainly in sleep to escape from hunger and cold. His teeth chattered in his head, and when he rose at dark to continue his journey his tattered clothes were frozen stiff. In this plight he pushed on resolutely, and was obliged to wade

---

<sup>5</sup> Captain Gates of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Ohio.

to his waist for hundreds of yards through one of those deep and treacherous morasses that proved such deadly fever-pools for McClellan's army in the campaign of 1862. Finally he reached the high ground, and as the severe exertion had set his blood again in motion and loosened his limbs, he was making better progress, when suddenly he found himself near a Confederate picket. This picket he easily avoided, and, keeping well in the shadow of the forest and shunning the roads, he pressed forward with increasing hopes of success. He had secured a box of matches before leaving Libby; and as the cold night came on and he felt that he was really in danger of freezing to death, he penetrated into the center of the cedar grove and built a fire in a small and secluded hollow. He felt that this was hazardous, but the necessity was desperate, since with his stiffened limbs he could no longer move along fast enough to keep the warmth of life in his body. To add to his trouble, his foot, which had been broken in Tennessee previous to his capture, was now giving him great pain, and threatened to cripple him wholly; indeed, it would stiffen and disable the best of limbs to compass the journey he had made in darkness over strange, uneven, and hard-frozen ground, and through rivers, creeks, and bogs, and this without food or warmth.

The fire was so welcome that he slept soundly - so soundly that waking in the early morning he found his boot-legs and half his uniform burned up, the ice on the rest of it probably having prevented its total destruction.

Resuming his journey much refreshed, he reached Crump's cross-roads, where he successfully avoided another picket. He traveled all day, taking occasional short rests, and before dark had reached New Kent Court House. Here again he saw some pickets, but by cautious flanking managed to pass them; but in crossing an open space a little farther on he was seen by a cavalry man, who at once put spurs to his horse and rode up to Rose, and, saluting him, inquired if he belonged to the New Kent Cavalry. Rose had on a gray cap, and seeing that he had a stupid sort of fellow to deal with, instantly answered, "Yes" whereupon the trooper turned his horse and rode back. A very few moments were enough to show Rose that the cavalryman's report had failed to satisfy his comrades, whom he could see making movements for his capture. He plunged through a laurel thicket, and had no sooner emerged than he saw the Confederates deploying around it in confidence that their game was bagged. He dashed on as fast as his injured foot would let him, and entered a tract of heavily timbered land that rose to the east of this thicket. At the border of the grove he found another picket post, and barely escaped the notice of several of the men. The only chance of escape lay through a wide, clear field before him, and even this was in full view from the grove that bordered it, and this he knew would soon swarm with his pursuers.

Across the center of this open field, which was fully half a mile wide, a ditch ran, which, although but a shallow gully, afforded a partial concealment. Rose, who could now hear the voices of the Confederates nearer and nearer, dove into the ditch as the only chance, and dropping on his hands and knees crept swiftly forward to the eastward. In this cramped position his progress was extremely painful, and his hands were torn by the briars and stones; but forward he dashed, fully expecting a shower of bullets every minute. At last he reached the other end of the half-mile ditch, breathless and half-dead, but without having once raised his head above the gully.

Emerging from this field he found himself in the Williamsburg road, and bordering the opposite side was an extensive tract thickly covered with pines. As he crossed and entered this tract he looked back and could see his enemies, whose movements showed

that they were greatly puzzled and off the scent. When at a safe distance he sought a hiding-place and took a needed rest of several hours.

He then resumed his journey and followed the direction of the Williamsburg road, which he found picketed at various points, so that it was necessary to avoid open spaces. Several times during the day he saw squads of Confederate cavalry passing along the road so near that he could hear their talk. Near nightfall he reached Diasen Bridge, where he successfully passed another picket. He kept on until nearly midnight when he lay down by a great tree and, cold as he was, slept soundly until daylight. He now made a careful reconnaissance and found near the road the ruins of an old building, which, he afterwards learned, was called "Burnt Ordinary."

He now found himself almost unable to walk with his injured foot, but, nerved by the yet bright hope of liberty, he once more went his weary way in the direction of Williamsburg. Finally he came to a place where there were some smoking fagots and a number of tracks, indicating it to have been a picket post of the previous night. He was now nearing Williamsburg, which he was inclined to believe, from such meager information as had reached Libby before his departure, was in possession of the Union forces. Still, he knew that this was territory that was frequently changing hands, and was therefore likely to be under a close watch. From this on he avoided the roads wholly and kept under cover as much as it was possible; and if compelled to cross an open field at all, he did so in a stooping position. He was now moving in a south-easterly direction, and coming again to the margin of a wide opening, he saw, to his unutterable joy, a body of Union troops advancing to the road towards him.

Thoroughly worn out, Rose, believing that his deliverers were at hand, sat down to await their approach. His pleasant reverie was disturbed by a sound behind and near him, and turning quickly he was startled to see three soldiers in the road along which the troops first seen were advancing. The fact that these men had not been noticed before gave Rose some uneasiness for a moment, but, as they wore blue uniforms, and moreover seemed to take no note of the approaching Federal troops, all things seemed to indicate that they were simply an advanced detail of the same body. This seemed to be further confirmed by the fact that the trio were now moving down the road apparently with the intent of joining the larger body; and as the ground to the east rose to a crest, both of the bodies were a minute later shut off from Rose's view. In the full confidence that all was right he rose to his feet and walked towards the crest, to get a better view of everything and greet his comrades of the loyal blue. A walk of a hundred yards brought him again in sight of the three men, who now noticed and challenged him.

In spite of appearances a vague suspicion forced itself upon Rose, who however obeyed the summons and continued to approach the party, who now watched him with fixed attention. As he came closer to the group, the brave but unfortunate soldier saw that he was lost.

For the first time the three seemed to be made aware of the approach of the Federals, and to show consequent alarm and haste. The unhappy Rose saw before the men spoke that their blue uniform was a disguise, and the discovery brought a savage expression to his lips. He hope and tried to convince his captors that he was a Confederate, but all in vain; they retained him as their prisoner, and now told him that they were Confederates. Rose, in the first bitter moment of his misfortune, thought seriously of breaking away to his friends so temptingly near; but his poor broken foot and the slender chance of

escaping three bullets at a few yards made this suicide, and he decided to wait for a better chance, and this came sooner than he expected.

One of the men appeared to be an officer, who detailed one of his companions to conduct Rose to the rear in the direction of Richmond. The prisoner went quietly with his guard, the other two men tarried a little to watch the advancing Federals, and now Rose began to limp like a man w ho was unable to go farther. Presently the ridge shut them off from the view of the others. Rose, who had slyly been staggering closer and closer to the guard, suddenly sprang upon the man, and before he had time to wink had twisted his gun from his grasp, discharged it into the air, flung it down, and ran off as fast as his poor foot would let him towards the east and so as to avoid the rest of the Confederates. The disarmed Confederate made no attempt at pursuit, nor indeed did the other two, who were now seen retreating at a run across the adjacent fields.

Rose's heart bounded with new hope, for he felt that he would be with his advancing comrades in a few minutes at most. All at once a squad of Confederates, hitherto unseen, rose up in his very path, and beat him down with the butts of their muskets. All hands now rushed around and secured him, and one of the men called out excitedly, "*Hurry up, boys: the Yankees are right here*". They rushed their prisoner into the wooded ravine, and here they were joined by the man whom Rose had just disarmed. He was in a savage mood, and declared it to be his particular desire to fill Rose full of Confederate lead. The officer in charge rebuked the man, however, and compelled him to cool down, and he went along with an injured air that excited the merriment of his comrades.

The party continued its retreat to Barhamsville, thence to the White House on the Pamunkey River, and finally to Richmond, where Rose was again restored to Libby, and, like the writer, was confined for a number of days in a narrow and loathsome cell. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of April his exchange was exchanged for a Confederate colonel, and on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July, 1864, he rejoined his regiment, in which he served with conspicuous gallantry to the close of the war.

As already stated, Hamilton reached the Union lines safely after many vicissitudes, and did brave service in the closing scenes of the rebellion. He is now a resident of Reedyville, Kentucky. Johnson, whose enforced confinement in Rat Hell gave him a unique fame in Libby, also made good his escape, and now lives at North Pleasantville, Kentucky.

**O**f the fifteen men who dug the successful tunnel, four are dead, viz.: Fitzsimmons, Gallagher, Garbett, and McDonald. Captain W.S.B. Randall lives at Hillsboro, Highland County, Ohio; Colonel Terrance Clark at Paris, Edgar County, Illinois; Captain Eli Foster at Chicago; Colonel N.S. McKean at Collinsville, Madison County, Illinois; and Captain J.C. Fislar at Lewiston, I. T. The addresses of Captains Lucas, Simpson, and Mitchell are unknown at this writing.

Colonel Rose has served faithfully almost since the end of the war with the 16<sup>th</sup> United States Infantry, in which command he holds a captain's commission; and no one meeting him in these peaceful days would hear from his reticent lips, or read in the placid face of the veteran, the thrilling story that links his name in so remarkable a manner with the history of the famous Bastille of the Confederacy.