

Register Supplement.

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INTERESTING NARRATIVE

OF THE ESCAPE OF TWO OFFICERS OF THE 154TH REGT. N. Y. S. VOL. FROM THE HANDS OF THE REBELS.

[Adj. Allison Crosby, one of the officers who escaped, was at one time a student in Alex. Shelton's law office in this place.]

ELMIRA, Feb. 28, 1864.

MY DEAR FRIEND:—Your letter requesting me to write you the circumstances connected with my capture by the Rebels at Gettysburg, and subsequent escape from "durance vile," is received. If it will afford you the smallest degree of pleasure to know the particulars of those scenes, which are to me so interesting, I shall be happy to state them.

To render the statement complete, it ought to contain an account of the terrific engagement which resulted in the capture of so many of the officers and men of the 154th. But I fear my letter would be so long, your patience would become entirely exhausted in reading it. I will therefore confine my narrative chiefly to events that transpired after finding myself within the rebel lines.

It was on the first day of July, and the first of those three days of terrible carnage, that the 154th Regt., together with two others, the 27th Pa., and the 134th New York, was ordered to take position to the extreme right of the Union line, to check a flank movement already begun by a heavy force of the enemy. Without waiting to rest a moment, after a rapid march of fifteen miles that day, they sprang forward at a double quick, through a torrent of shot and shell, until the designated position was attained. Before they got into line, a murderous fire was poured into their ranks from a rebel Brigade concealed in a wheat field close at hand. Nothing daunted, they formed in line, advanced, and opened the battle with great energy. The enemy advanced in splendid style, and swung their left wing, which extended far beyond our right, gradually around, until we were handsomely flanked. Not a man flinched or gave an inch to the overwhelming force opposed to them. There they stood, firm as the Pyramids, fighting with the desperation of a forlorn hope; a murderous fire all the time raking them in front and flank. The enemy was gradually closing in upon us, and to remain longer was certain capture. The order to fall back was given. We had no supports or reserves. On looking around we discovered for the first time that the whole line on our left had fallen back, and were being hotly pursued by the exultant rebels. We were hemmed in on both flanks.

The only avenue of retreat lay through a road, along which a rebel column was dashing, in pursuit of our troops that had fallen back on the left of us. We entered the road, and a fierce hand to hand conflict ensued. The opposing forces were mingled in promiscuous confusion. Four color-bearers in the 154th were shot down in rapid succession. The only resource left was to cut through the enemy's ranks. The bayonet was used, but alas, what could a mere handful of men do against the thousands that surrounded us on all sides? A few in the confusion escaped, but the majority were either killed, wounded or captured. Of the later, out of the 154th, were twelve commissioned officers and a hundred and fifty men. We were hurried off to the rear, over the battle ground strewn with the dead and wounded of both armies. During the two following days of the battle, we were kept under guard a little in rear of the rebel line.

With mind and senses wrought up to intense activity we watched the progress of the battle. Our hearts sank within us as we detected by the sound of the conflict on the left of the line, that it was being pushed back. You can perhaps imagine the despair that filled our breasts, when at night, after the second day's conflict was over, the rebels told us that Longstreet had doubled back our left wing and driven it seven miles. That they only ceased the pursuit on account of the darkness, and would make quick work of the Army of the Potomac in the morning.

But as a Union prisoner was brought in, fresh from the field of conflict, and we gathered eagerly around him to learn the real condition of affairs, what a burden of anxiety and distress was lifted

from our hearts on being told that our left wing had been driven back about a mile and a half, but the opportune arrival of the 6th Corps had checked the exultant enemy and repulsed him with immense slaughter. "Our line is re-established, and secure," he said, "and the men are eager for a renewal of the fight in the morning, confident of a crowning victory." We laid down on the grass that night and slept sweetly, with a new-born hope in our bosoms.

The early part of the day was occupied by Gen. Lee in preparation for the last desperate struggle to break the Union lines. Every cannon and every available man was put in position for the final assault. If this effort failed, retreat was inevitable to the boasted and invincible Army of the Confederacy.

Orders were promulgated at the head of every regiment, appealing to their heroism and courage, in the most extravagant terms of mingled adulation and entreaty. Victory or utter route and perhaps annihilation awaited them.

At length the simultaneous crash of two hundred rebel cannon opened the ball. An equal number responded from the opposite hill where our artillery was posted. The earth trembled and shook for miles around with the terrible concussion. The air groaned and shrieked with flying missiles, bursting and flying in all directions and lighting up, with a sullen and lurid glare, the dark sulphur clouds that hung over the field. The opposite crests were wrapped in flames, and dense clouds of smoke rolled over the valley, darkening the heavens with gloom. Great trees were shattered into thousands of fragments—branches were torn from others and tossed into the darkened air or hurled into the deep shade below. Cañons were on fire and exploding at rapid intervals. Horses were running with wild fright over the field, or floundering, bleeding and mangled, on the ground. It was the most awful, grand and terribly sublime spectacle I ever witnessed.

For an hour the terrible cannonade was kept up without intermission. The enemy then formed two strong lines of battle and advanced to assault the Union position along the entire line. The Union artillery ceased firing, and as the rebel army swept down the opposite slope, in compact lines—with banners flying and drums beating, it was a magnificent sight. Steadily and silently they advanced within short range of our artillery, when suddenly a sheet of flame burst from the crest of the hill—a deafening crash—a dense white cloud—and two hundred cannon hurled a merciless storm of grape and canister into their ranks; another long roll of smoke further down the hill—another deafening shout, and fifty thousand rifles sent their deadly messengers into the staggering line. The first line was gone. Nothing daunted, the second, with an insistency that sought death, steadily advanced. Another simultaneous discharge of artillery and musketry—and when the smoke rose from the scene, the rebel army, the vaunted chivalry of the American Continent, was floundering with confusion in the valley. So pitiless was the whirlwind of grape and canister, and rifle balls which swept its files, that hundreds of the terror stricken enemy fell on their hands and knees and crawled up to our lines to save their lives.

Thus ended the battle of Gettysburg. General Lee collected his scattered force and made no more effort to carry the Union position.

That night no oppressive doubts and fears disturbed us, and we slept soundly. The morning dawned clear and pleasant. It was the 4th of July, and feeling jubilant over the result of the great struggle, we determined to celebrate the occasion with becoming exercises, as far as our limited circumstances would admit of it. We had no big gun to fire off. No Declaration of Independence to read. No orator to electrify us with soul-stirring recitals of the "scenes and times that tried men's souls," when our ancestors were "Rebels." But we had a few hundred Union prisoners, with hearts brimfull of joy for the glorious result of Gettysburg!

About noon a terrific thunder-storm commenced, and we were started on our long journey toward Richmond. The storm finally settled down to a cold, steady rain. At night we were turned in

to a corn-field, to sleep in the open storm or not sleep at all. Exhausted with fatigue and hunger, (for we had had nothing to eat since our capture, except what we could buy of our guards with our pocket-knives and other trinkets we happened to have with us, we soon fell asleep on the wet grass, to forget our troubles until morning.

The next day we were marched up the mountain and encamped on the summit of the Blue Ridge, at Monterey Springs. In the morning we received flour rations and cooked our breakfast, which consisted of a hard cake, manufactured after this fashion: A little flour mixed up with water, and rolled out into a thin, round mass, and set up before the fire on a chip or flat stone to bake. My experience in the culinary art being quite limited, it was not surprising, perhaps, that my biscuits were a little hard and heavy. At all events the result of my effort convinced me that my talent for brick making is better than bread making.

On the morning of the sixth of July, we started from Monterey Springs, and marched across the State of Maryland, without stopping to eat or sleep. Arrived at Williamsport, on the Potomac, about two o'clock, P. M., on the 7th day of July, when, after baking some of our unique biscuits, and surprising our stomachs with a little food, we laid down in utter exhaustion, and slept until the next morning. Although the rain fell in torrents we heard it not. Nature was restoring itself, and we slept as soundly and sweetly as if we had been in our own comfortable houses of which we dreamed.

The next morning we crossed the Potomac in a ferry-boat, the Pontoon Bridge having been destroyed a few days before by Kilpatrick's cavalry. The ferry-boat could carry only about forty at a time, and the progress of crossing was slow. About four thousand prisoners had to cross in that way. That night we slept on the "Sacred Soil" of the Old Dominion, near the river.

The next day we were put in motion and marched until about midnight, when we were encamped on the margin of a large pond, called Big Spring, between Martinsburg and Winchester. After crossing the Potomac, all hopes of escape were abandoned. Before that time, we had indulged some hope that our cavalry might rescue us, but now we were in the enemy's country, and Lee's army and the swollen Potomac between us and any assistance.

The next morning, the 10th of July and of our capture, dawned bright and beautiful. The dark clouds that had hung over us so many days had gone, and the scenery of the Shenandoah Valley looked unusually fresh and lovely, from the recent rain. Everything around wore a cheerful and inviting aspect. The birds that sung in the orchard trees over our heads, and skimming over the pond at our feet, seemed to mock at our calamity and looked upon our captivity as complacently as if it was a misfortune peculiar to men, and a matter in which birds had no lot or interest.

The happy, exhilarating influences of that morning, and the joyous freedom of the birds, as I gazed upon the prospect, every where around, roused a sudden and irrepressible desire for liberty, and I determined to attempt an escape from "durance vile," at whatever hazard.

The thought of a weary march over the burning roads to Richmond at that sultry time of year, and imprisonment in a filthy tobacco warehouse, perhaps, for months, with nothing but adamant biscuits for food—strengthened my resolution and stamped it with a seal of fate.

I hastily put away my half-consumed loaf, and imparted my determination to my comrades, asking some one of them to embark with me in the enterprise. No one could be induced to attempt it, except Lieut. John Mitchell, Co. D., 164th a bold and brave soul, as reckless of danger, as he is fond of excitement.

No time was to be lost. Breakfast was over and a few moments would see us marching "On to Richmond." The pond I have mentioned was two or three rods from our camp. Two lines of guards had been placed down to the water, so as to form an avenue through which the prisoners could go down to wash. Pulling out our pocket handkerchiefs, (which had been used as flour sacks to carry

our rations in,) we started for the pond carrying them extended at arm's length so the guard could see we were going to wash them.

Fortunately there was a steep bank of eight or ten feet in height, descending to the water's edge, a little to our right, which was covered with short thick bushes and vines.

The plan was to watch an opportunity when the guard did not see us, and plunge into the thicket and lie concealed until the column moved off. No chance was afforded, and as time was precious, I sat down on the bank and engaged the guard in conversation, until Lieutenant Mitchell stealthily crawled into the bushes out of sight. I was in a great dilemma how I could get into the thicket also. The order to "fall in" was given, and the guard stepped upon the bank and commenced rolling his blanket. I pulled out my handkerchief and commenced washing it again, and when his eye was withdrawn stealthily crept into the bushes with the Lieutenant. The foliage was very dense and it was impossible to discover a person unless the leaves were parted. We lay close on the ground in breathless silence, when the sentinel came past our hiding-place, at the foot of the bank, looking for us. Fortunately he did not see us and went back. He probably thought we had joined the others while he was rolling his blanket and preparing to march.

The next thing to be done was to get away from our hiding place and find refuge in the woods. This was a hazardous undertaking, for we lay within a few rods of the pike on which the rebel ammunition train was continually passing. The road was also filled with stragglers, wounded men, and detachments of cavalry passing to and fro. If we should leave our hiding place in the bushes and attempt to get into the woods, we would have to expose ourselves in full view of the road for fifty rods. But something must be done. It was early in the morning, and to lie on that perpendicular bank until dark, was next to impossible. So we crawled out of the bushes and deliberately walked off across the field, expecting every step to hear a challenge to halt or a rebel bullet whistling past us. But no challenge or bullet came, and we succeeded in reaching a fence, over which we climbed, and getting down on the ground went about fifteen rods "snake fashion," until a small hill concealed us from the pike. Hardly had we regained our feet and started for the woods, ere we discovered a few rods ahead two rebel soldiers, coming from the opposite way by the side of the fence towards us. Instantly we threw ourselves upon the ground and the soldiers passed us. We then hurried into the woods and determined to await the approach of night.

As we sat under the shadow of the tree in the edge of the woods, discussing our future plans, having become a little careless and unwary in our fancied security, a little circumstance occurred which nearly cost us all our efforts in vain. We heard a sound like some person jumping on the ground, and looking around, discovered two rebel soldiers who had just jumped over a fence, and were coming almost directly toward us. It was too late to conceal ourselves, and fortunately we had presence of mind enough to sit perfectly still. They passed within forty feet of us, although we were sitting in plain view. After that escape we crawled under some bushes at the corner of the fence and lay concealed until the weary hours of that long day wore away, and the sun disappeared behind the western mountains. After darkness had settled down over the valley, we bent our steps towards the mountains on the west side of the Shenandoah.

We had neither chart nor compass, and the only guide to direct us through that strange country in the darkness of the night was the North Star. Our plan was to cross the valley and get into the mountains of the Allegany range by daylight, where we supposed we could travel in the daytime without danger. We intended to strike the Potomac at the point where it breaks through the Blue Ridge, and by that means get around Lee's army to the westward, which still lay at Williamsport, Maryland. So we kept our little astral guide to our right, and went in a direction a little north of west. The first difficulty was to cross the pike which lay between

us and our westward journey. The rebel train was continually moving on this pike. But we crept up to the fence and watched an opportunity when a slight brake in the train occurred, and slipped through between the wagons. Then on we went, groping our way through corn fields, wheat fields and forests, with nothing to light us but the feeble stars which gradually grew fainter as the fog rose until nearly every tiny ray was obscured. I shall never forget that night's ramble, over hill and thro' valleys, across streams and morasses, and through brambles and forests. About 3 o'clock in the morning we came to an old straw stack in a field, and being utterly exhausted with fatigue and hunger determined to take an hour's sleep and then pursue our journey. We sank down upon the pile, wet with dew and chilled with the cold, damp fog, with the heavens our only covering, and the stars our sentinels.

An hour's sleep refreshed us very much and we went forward with renewed energies. The wheat fields through which we passed being wet with dew, we were soon drenched to the skin. Gradually the eastern horizon began to indicate the approach of dawn. We resolved to enter a house, if we could find one on our route, sufficiently isolated to warrant us in venturing in. We soon came to a modest little dwelling, in the field, and after reconnoitering until satisfied there was no "Grey-backs" around, we went in and called for breakfast. There were two persons in the house; an elderly lady, and her daughter, about eighteen. The daughter was quite handsome and appeared intelligent, so of course our conversation was chiefly with her. She was shrewd enough to know that our questions tended to elicit any information about rebels, and the probability of meeting scouts or pickets in that vicinity. But she very frankly told us, after a while, that she was "Unconditionally for the Union." This we doubted, for the old lady seemed very anxious to create a different impression. They were evidently in a quandary what to say. They thought we were rebel spies, in disguise, trying to hunt up subjects for conscription, and see whether any of the inhabitants were tainted with Unionism. The young lady was so vehement in her loyalty we were at length constrained to believe her sincere, and told her who we were. She would not believe it. "I have seen rebel officers before," said she "with the Union uniform, going through the country for the same purpose you are, but you will not find anyone here to force into your army." She then spoke of our getting defeated at Gettysburg and said that she was glad of it. She said hundreds of wounded rebels had been along there for the last two or three days, and the country was filled with them. We told her she was mistaken about our being rebels, and convinced her by exhibiting letters we had received from the north, directed to us in the 154th regt. N. Y. Vols. She was delighted to learn that we really were Union officers, and told us that the whole family were loyal. "But we have to be very careful with our sentiments here," said she, "for we are the only union family in the neighborhood and it would not do for us to talk much." They got us an excellent breakfast to which we did ample justice, and offered to pay them. "No, they were not taking pay from Union soldiers." We consulted a map, and I drew a hasty sketch of our route into a pocket diary I had with me, which helped us very much in our subsequent journey. They filled our pockets with provisions, gave us a canteen of milk and sent us on our way with a fervent hope that we might succeed in our undertaking.

We were now very near the mountains, and before the fog cleared away we were travelling up their rough and rocky sides. We reached the summit and followed it northward toward the Potomac, intending to cross by swimming as soon as we reached it. There was a flat level space on the top of the ridge, about ten feet wide, running the whole length of the mountain. As we reached the summit, and gazed down upon the valley below where we had toiled so long and severely through the previous night, and saw the whole scene spread out like a vast panorama before us, and thought our danger was passed, and in a few hours more we would again tread the soil and breathe the air of a loyal state, we were almost wild with delight. From that lofty rostrum of nature, we delivered a very enthusiastic valedictory to Jeff Davis and the "Confederacy," and resumed our journey. An unwise sense of security relaxed our vigilance, and came very near securing our recapture. Imagine our consternation when a little way ahead of us, coming on the top of the ridge, we discovered two rebel soldiers! As quick as thought we leaped over the edge of some large rocks and hid ourselves behind them. Fortunately the rebels did not see us, but pass-

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Randolph, April 10, 1877.

J. C. KNAPP.

ed by, almost over our heads, and went on.

We were now almost to Hedgesville, a little village built in the gap of the mountain. As we were descending the slope towards the town we heard children's voices at play, ahead of us, and carefully advanced toward them. Having discovered that they were young children—two white little boys, and two "contrabands"—we approached them and inquired if there were any soldiers in the village.

"O, yes, sir," said one of them, "right smart lot of them." "Are they Rebel or Union soldiers?" "Rebels, sir," said the boy. "Are there any pickets around here?" "Oh, yes, sir," said he, there's one right down there," pointing down the slope. "Is he a cavalry picket?" "Yes, sir, and and there are some more up above the village." "How far beyond the village do the pickets extend?" I inquired. "Not but a little bit, I reckon," he replied.

We were going almost directly towards the picket at the foot of the mountains, and had got within a few rods of him when we encountered these little boys.— This was escape number four, under remarkable circumstances, and we began to think that perhaps Providence was not entirely neutral in the matter. Had it not been for those children our northward journey would have terminated at Hedgesville. Retracing our steps up the mountain, we did some "forced marching" until the summit was reached again. Calling a Council of War, we decided to go around the village by making a wide detour, and strike the Potomac higher up, where we hoped the pickets would not molest us.

On we traveled, over mountains and across ravines, until nearly sunset. At length, as we were following the crest of a high mountain, we were suddenly brought to a halt, and then, down hundreds of feet beneath us, rolled the majestic Potomac! I can never forget the emotions that filled my breast as I gazed upon that mighty river, rolling in sullen majesty through the gulf below. The water was dark and turbid, and the river swollen to its maximum height by the recent heavy rains. At a time when our minds were less wrought up with anxiety for escape, the thought of plunging into its boiling and whirling current would have been madness. But the Maryland shore looked inviting, and the hardships and dangers we had incurred, inspired us with a confidence bordering on the most reckless temerity.

We followed the precipice down to the foot of the mountain, and approached the water. To take off our clothing, roll it up in a bundle and fasten it to our backs, was the work of a moment. One look across the rolling flood—a short pause—not so long as Cæsar made upon the banks of the Rubicon—a plunge, and we were buffeting with the angry flood, "and stemming it with lusty sinews." About six rods above us, the current was broken up by a ledge of rocks, and thrown into a foaming and seething torrent. Where we were struggling below, it was full of whirlpools and eddies through which it was next to impossible to swim. Gradually we became more and more exhausted, as the bundle of clothes upon our backs became saturated with water, and bore us down so the waves washed over our heads at almost every stroke we took. It was evident we could not reach the opposite shore without the interposition of a miracle. I looked back to see if it would be possible to return to our starting point. We were far out in the stream near the centre. It would be useless to turn back. A wide sea of whirling waters encompassed us. I tried to touch the bottom, but in vain. We were fast falling. Our strokes were growing feebler and slower. Our position was nearly vertical in the current, with nothing but the face above the water. Imagine my horror at seeing Lieut. Mitchell sink beneath the waves. I supposed he was gone, and that I should follow him in a few minutes I had not the least doubt. He rose again and struggled on. Death stared us in the face with all its ghastly horrors, and we were rapidly sinking into his insatiable jaws. Hope died within us; and a sullen despair, a sort of stolid indifference, came over us. The terror of our situation vanished, and a flood of recollections flashed through our minds. It seemed as if the memories of a life-time were crowded into one moment.

Suddenly my foot rested upon a rock at the bottom of the river, and quick as thought I clung to it with the desperation of a new-born hope. The current bore me down rapidly, and I momentarily expected to be swept off into the deep water again, when gaining a foothold, I braced with all my might against the flood, and stopped. Lieut. Mitchell was near at hand, and I called to him to reach the point where I stood if possible. With the utmost difficulty he did so, and there we stood in the rushing torrent up to our

shoulders, rocking back and forth in a fierce struggle to maintain our position. The bundles on our backs must go, or we would soon go with them to a watery grave, that was certain. Hitherto we could not get them off, but now was an opportunity. They went tumbling along on the rough current—boots, coat, unmentionables, waistcoats, underclothing and all. Hats had dived down stream long before. Disengaged from these burdens, we started on with new vigor. The current near this shore was less rapid and rough, and not being weighed down with clothing, we succeeded in reaching the bank, exhausted, faint and sick. The only wardrobe we had left consisted of a "finger ring." In that unique and scanty costume we crawled, for we could not walk, out of the water and up the bank. We were in "Maryland, my Maryland" once more, having swam half a mile.

Seeing a "contraband" cutting wheat in a field near by, we shouted to him to go and get us something to put on. He looked at us a moment and started off in the direction of a house situated on an eminence a little beyond. We supposed he had gone to do our bidding, and feeling elated with our success, laid down upon the grass and patiently awaited his return. After a long time, several men rode up to where we were "encamped," and we intimated that a little clothing would be thankfully received.

An old man, who seemed to be the organ of the party, very emphatically gave us to understand that we could not be furnished with clothes, and expressed his opinion in terms more forcible than elegant, that we did not deserve any. He then continued to berate us in the most passionate manner, calling us "infernal rebels" come over to rob, and steal, and plunder, and said it was a wonder and a pity we did not drown in the river. At length, when his passion had reached its climax, he ordered us to get up and go with him to Gen. Mulligan's headquarters, at Clear Spring, three miles from there, where he hoped justice would be done to us speedily. Much as we desired to go to Gen. Mulligan's quarters, we had some doubts about our toilet being exactly a la mode for a visit to the hero of Lexington, and we told him so. Thereupon he tried to ride his horse over us in his rage to think we dare disobey his commands. We grasped some stones that lay on the ground, and informed the old gentleman that such a demonstration must not be repeated. He probably recalled the tragic fate of ancient Goliath, and cooled down a little. Being convinced that the old man was loyal, we told who we were, and how we happened to be in such a pitiable plight. If his rage had been terrible a few minutes before, his surprise and chagrin was now unbounded. He could not find language to express the apologies he would make for the treatment he had bestowed upon us. Tears glistened in his eyes as he turned to the negro (who had come back with the rest), and told him to go and get some pants for us. Another one went for shirts, and soon we were clad in old blue overalls, patched and mended with different cloth, until they represented all the colors of Joseph's coat. Then mounting behind them on a couple of horses, we rode to the old man's house, without hats, boots or coat.

He said we must stay with him over night, which we did gladly. He told us Lee's army had not got over the river yet, but lay at Williamsport, about ten miles below. There might be rebel scouts and foraging parties up there again, as there had been that day, but he would pass us off as his sons if they came. We were perfectly at ease, for looking as we did nobody would have dreamed that we had seen an army in our lives.

Next morning he gave us some old chip hats, that looked as if they had descended to that family from an antique ancestry. He gave Lieut. Mitchell a pair of old shoes that seemed to be laughing at their own ludicrous appearance, and one of my feet was graced with an old canvas gaiter, while the other foot was thrust into an old boot with the leg cut off.

Often have the eventful scenes of those first fifteen days of July recurred to me; and when I have thought of the privations and hardships we endured, the obstacles and dangers we encountered, I have felt deeply grateful to Him whose kind Providence rescued us from all our perils, and restored us to that noble army, whose onward march was destined to sweep every vestige of treason from the land, and open up to our cherished country a broader freedom and more exalted civilization.