Parley P. Pratt’s Escape from Jail

The four following chapters are extracted from the Millennial Star, published in Liverpool, England, Numbers 9, 10 and 11, Vol. VIII.

Richmond Jail

At the end of this extraordinary mock trial or inquisition, which lasted over two weeks, I was unchained from Joseph and Hyrum Smith, and the others, and being separated from them, was conducted to a gloomy, dark, cold and filthy dungeon in Richmond, Ray County, where I was doomed to spend the winter and spring, and await a further trial; while they shared a similar fate in a place called Liberty, in Clay County.

When I first entered the dungeon there were some twenty men, mostly heads of families, who had been torn from their families in those awful times, and thrust into prison. It was not only crowded to suffocation, without a chair, stool, bench, bed, furniture or window light, but just then completely filled with smoke by a fire which was lighted in a stove without a pipe, or any conductor for the smoke to pass out, except at the crevices between the timbers, where the winter storm was passing in. When my guard conducted me to the door of this miserable cell it grated on its huge hinges and opened like the pit yawning to receive me; a volume of thick smoke issued forth and seemed to forbid my entrance; but, urged in my rear by bayonets and loaded pistols in the hands of savage beings, I endeavored to enter, but was forced to retreat again outside of the door to breathe for a moment the free air. At this instant several pistols were cocked and presented at my head and breast, with terrible threats and oaths of instant death if I did not go in again. I told them to fire as soon as they pleased, for I must breathe a moment or die in the attempt. After standing a few moments, I again entered the prison, and threw myself down, my face to the floor, to avoid the smoke. Here I remained for some time, partly in a state of insensibility; my heart sickened within me, and a deathlike feeling came over me, from which I did not wholly recover for several days.

I arose, however, as soon as I was able, and began to speak to and recognize my fellow prisoners most of whom were my neighbors and acquaintances. The door was now locked, bolted and barred, and several guards placed before it. The fire died away, and the smoke gradually cleared away from the dungeon; but the floor formed a hard and cold winter lodging.

In a few days all those in our prison, except five, were released on bail, and themselves and bail banished from the State, with the rest of the Society; thus compelling them to forfeit their bail bonds, which amounted in all to many thousand dollars. The five who remained were Morris Phelps, Darwin Chase, Norman Shearer, Luman Gibbs and myself. Two of these were finally dismissed—being boys scarcely out of their teens. But another was soon added by the name of King Follett.

This made our final number four. One of this number, viz.: Luman Gibbs, denied the faith and turned a traitor to the others; becoming their most inveterate enemy. This was in order to save his life and gain his liberty. However, he was still kept in prison as a spy upon us, lest it should be said that it was wholly a religious persecution; but he was treated very well, and went out to dine with the Sheriff or others, or to spend a day
with his wife whenever it pleased him to do so. Our food was of the most unwholesome kind, and scant at that; consisting of bones and remnants of meat, coarse corn bread, and sometimes a little coffee. We generally partook of our meals in a standing position, using our fingers instead of knives, forks or plates. A tin cup served us for our coffee. We were guarded very strictly, both by night and day, by two or three men with loaded pistols.

These consisted of the most unprincipled, profligate villains that could be found anywhere. They would swear, drink, gamble, and sing the most obscene and disgusting songs. They would boast of shooting the Mormons; robbing and plundering them; committing rapes, etc. They would also insult every female slave or black woman who might happen to come within hearing, and then boast of their criminal connections with them. The blasphemy; the noisy grumbling; the blackguard chit chat; doleful lullaby and vulgar songs of these guards grating daily upon our ears, seemed like the howls and wailings of the damned, or like wandering spirits and demons hovering around to torment us. What greatly added to our affliction, as if to complete our hell, the old apostate, Gibbs, became very quarrelsome and noisy not only to us, but with his wife also, who sometimes came into the prison to spend a few days with him. He was a hard faced, ill formed man, of about fifty years of age; full of jealousy, extremely selfish, very weak minded, and withal, a little love cracked; and, I may say, that he seemed not to possess one redeeming quality.

His wife was about the same age, and withal, a coarse, tall, masculine looking woman, and one of whom he had no reason to complain or be jealous. True, she did not love him for no female could possibly do that; but then no one else would love her, nor was she disposed to court their affections. However, he was jealous of her, and, therefore, abused her; and this kept a constant and noisy strife and wrangling between them whenever she was present.

Whole nights were spent in this way, during which no one in or about the prison slept. After a quarrel of some two or three days and nights between them, he would attempt to regain her love, and a conversation like the following would ensue. Luman, drawing down his face and drawling his words with a loud and doleful tone, commenced, as follows:

“Now, Phila, won’t you love me? Come; here’s my watch, and here’s all the money I’ve got!” Then turning to us, he would exclaim: “Boys, I’ll tell you all about it; the fact is, she never did love me; she only married me out of pity—we being members of the Baptist church together in Vermont.” Then again addressing his wife: “Come now, Phila; won’t you love me? O, that I had been born a rich man! I would give you a dollar a minute to love me.”

Phila would then laugh and call him “a silly old fool.” Whereupon he would turn away in a rage, and exclaim: “Go along away, you ----, you! Nobody wants your love, no how!”

On one occasion they had quarreled and kept us awake all night, and just at break of day we heard a noise like a scuffle and a slamming against the wall; next followed a woman’s voice, half in a laugh and half in exultation: “Te-he-he-he, Luman, what’s the matter? What’s the matter, Luman?” Then a pause, and afterwards a man’s voice in a grum, sorry, and rather a whining tone was heard at a distance from the bed, exclaiming: “Now, I swan, Phila, that’s tu bad.”
The truth of the matter was this: She bad braced her back against the wall, and with both her feet placed against his body, had kicked him out of bed, and landed him upon the opposite side of the room.

Such scenes as these and all the folly of the guards served to enhance the misery of imprisonment, and to render our sufferings complete. We tried to keep them quiet, but tried in vain. Neither threats nor persuasion, coaxing nor reasoning had any influence over them. This miserable specimen of humanity was a peculiar favorite of the Sheriff and guards, and other citizens of Richmond. He was considered by them as the only honest, good, deserving man in the prison. He, in turn, watched our movements closely, and was ready to betray us on the least show, on our part, of any meditated plan of escape.

Under these painful circumstances we spent a long and dreary winter. Our whole community, who were not in prison, were forced out of the State, with the loss of homes, property, and many lives. They fled by thousands to Illinois.

My wife visited me several times in prison; but at length the period expired that the State authorities had stipulated for every Mormon to be gone, and my wife and children, and a few others who remained behind, were obliged to fly or be exterminated, as bands of armed men were roaming amid the deserted settlements, robbing, plundering, destroying property, and threatening all who remained.

My fellow prisoners, who had been separated from me and sent to the prison at Liberty, had also effected their escape, and had fled to Illinois to join their families. In short, all were gone, except King Follett, Morris Phelps and myself, and the old apostate, who was left to torment us.

Alone in a State which was wholly governed by an open banditti of murderers and robbers, we seemed abandoned to our fate, and doomed to suffer that full weight of vengeance and fury which seemed in reserve for an entire people; but that people were now beyond their reach; all the fury of the storm, therefore, seemed now to beat upon our heads. We were daily threatened with assassination, without the form of a trial; and were repeatedly told that we never should escape alive from the State. Our guards were doubly vigilant, while the Sheriff took every possible precaution. Luman, the apostate, was also in constant watchfulness, and busy in forming plans for escape; then accusing us and pretending to reveal wonderful things to our keepers in regard to our plans; which, in fact, only existed in his lying brain. This increased the severity of our confinement, and seemed to preclude the possibility of escape.

To be tried without friends or witnesses, or even with them, by a set of “Gadianton robbers” and murderers, who could drive out and murder women and children, was but to be condemned and executed; to tarry there and drag out a miserable life, while our wives and children wandered abroad in a land of strangers, without the protection of husbands and fathers, was worse than to die ten thousand deaths.

Under these circumstances, and half way between hope and despair, I spent several days in fasting and prayer, during which one deep and all absorbing inquiry, one only thought, seemed to hold possession of my mind. It seemed to me that if there was a God in Heaven who ever spake to man on earth I would know from him the truth of this one question. It was not how long shall I suffer; it was not when or by what means I should be delivered; but it was simply this: Shall I ever, at any time, however distant it may be, or whatever I may suffer first; shall I ever be free again in this life, and enjoy the society of my dear wife and children, and walk abroad at liberty, dwell in society and preach the gospel, as I have done in bygone years?

Let me be sure of this and I care not what I suffer. To circumnavigate the globe, to traverse the deserts of Arabia, to wander amid the wild scenes of the Rocky Mountains to accomplish so desirable an object, would seem like a mere trifle if I could only be sure at last. After some days of prayer and fasting, and seeking the Lord on the subject, I retired to my bed in my lonely chamber at an
early hour, and while the other prisoners and the guard were chatting and beguiling the lonesome hours in the upper apartment of the prison, I lay in silence, seeking and expecting an answer to my prayer, when suddenly I seemed carried away in the spirit, and no longer sensible to outward objects with which I was surrounded. A heaven of peace and calmness pervaded my bosom; a personage from the world of spirits stood before me with a smile of compassion in every look, and pity mingled with the tenderest love and sympathy in every expression of the countenance. A soft hand seemed placed within my own, and a glowing cheek was laid in tenderness and warmth upon mine. A well known voice saluted me, which I readily recognized as that of the wife of my youth, who had for near two years been sweetly sleeping where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest. I was made to realize that she was sent to commune with me, and answer my question. Knowing this, I said to her in a most earnest and inquiring tone: Shall I ever be at liberty again in this life and enjoy the society of my family and the Saints, and preach the gospel as I have done? She answered definitely and unhesitatingly: “YES!” I then recollected that I had agreed to be satisfied with the knowledge of that one fact, but now I wanted more.

Said I: Can you tell me how, or by what means, or when I shall escape? She replied: “THAT THING IS NOT MADE KNOWN TO ME YET.” I instantly felt that I had gone beyond my agreement and my faith in asking this last question, and that I must be contented at present with the answer to the first.

Her gentle spirit then saluted me and withdrew. I came to myself. The doleful noise of the guards, and the wrangling and angry words of the old apostate again grated on my ears, but Heaven and hope were in my soul.

Next morning I related the whole circumstance of my vision to my two fellow prisoners, who rejoiced exceedingly. This may seem to some like an idle dream, or a romance of the imagination; but to me it was, and always will be, a reality, both as it regards what I then experienced and the fulfillment afterwards.

In order to show some pretence of respect for some of the forms of law, Judge Austin A. King now entered our prison and took our testimony, preparatory to a change of venue. I shall never forget this interview. There stood our Judge, face to face with those who, by his cruelty and injustice, had lived a cold half year in a dungeon. He refused to look us in the eye; hung his head and looked like a culprit before his betters about to receive his doom. The looks of guilt and misery portrayed in his countenance during that brief interview bespoke more of misery than we had suffered during our confinement. I actually pitied him in my heart. With an extraordinary effort and a voice scarcely audible, he administered the oaths and withdrew.

By means of this change we were finally to be removed one hundred miles down the country, and confined in the prison at Columbia, Boone County, to await a final trial.

A long, dreary winter and spring had now passed away, and the time drew near for our removal. We looked forward to the change with some degree of hope and expectation, for it could not be for the worse, and might, perhaps, be for the better. At any rate, the journey would give us a chance to leave our dark and loathsome dungeon, and look upon the light of day, the beauties of nature, and to breathe the untainted air.

The morning of the departure at length arrived. Mr. Brown, the Sheriff, entered our prison with a fierce and savage look, and, bidding us hold out our hands,
Parley P. Pratt’s Escape from Jail

coupled us together in pairs, with irons locked on our wrists, and marched us out; and, amid a throng of people, placed us in a carriage. Accompanied with four other guards on horseback, with loaded pistols, we bid farewell to Richmond.

Trip to Columbia

It was a pleasant morning in early summer, when all the freshness and beauty of spring seemed blended in rich profusion, with the productions peculiar to the season as it advanced towards maturity. The leaves on the trees were full grown, and the forest presented a freshness of beauty and loveliness which reminded me of Paradise. The plains were covered with a coat of green, and the wild flowers of the prairie, blooming in all their variety, sent forth a perfume which mingled with every zephyr, and wafted sweet odors on every breeze. To prisoners who had breathed only a tainted air for half a year the very ground itself seemed to send forth a sweetness which was plainly perceptible to the senses. We enjoyed our ride through that delightful country more than any being could who had never been confined for weary months in a dreary dungeon.

The day at length closed, and we were taken into a house and stretched upon our backs on the floor, all fastened together with wrist and ankle irons in such a manner that we could not turn nor change our position. The doors and windows were then made fast, and the sentinels on duty guarded us by turns until morning. This was our night’s rest after forty miles travel.

The next day proved extremely rainy, with heavy thunder; but still we travelled. In the course of the day we came to a stream which was swollen by the rains to that degree that we had to swim over it and stem a swift current. This hindered us for some hours—in crossing over with horses, wagons, baggage, etc.; and as all of us were engaged in this business, our chains were taken off for the time.

When we had crossed over, put on our clothes, and replaced the baggage, saddles, arms, etc., ready for a start, it was night, and we were very weary and hungry, having had no refreshments during the day. The rain was also pouring in torrents, and the night setting in extremely dark. Four miles of wild country, partly covered with forests and underwood, still lay between us and the nearest house. Through the hurry of the moment, or for some other reason, they neglected to replace our irons, and our limbs were free. The carriage drove through a thick forest during the extreme darkness, and was several times on the eve of upsetting. This caused us to assume a position for saving ourselves by rising upon our feet, ready to jump out in case of the carriage upsetting.

The Sheriff and guards seeing this, rode close on each side, and, cocking their pistols, swore they would shoot us dead if we attempted to leave the carriage, and that if it upset they would shoot us anyhow, for fear we might attempt to escape.

Columbia Jail

After two days more of rain, hail and travel, we arrived at Columbia, where we were immediately thrust into a gloomy dungeon filled with darkness, filth and cobwebs; the naked floor was our lodging. We had travelled hard, through rain and fatigue, for several days, and on the last day had rode till sundown without refreshment. We were extremely hungry and weary, but received no refreshment, not even a drink of water, till late in the evening, when our new keeper, Mr. John Scott, visited us with some buttermilk and bread; but we were now too much exhausted and too low spirited to eat. We thanked him for his kindness, and sank down exhausted on the floor, where we rested as well as we could till morning. We saw no more of Sheriff Brown or his guards, and will now take final leave of them, merely observing that they made it a point to insult every black woman they met on the way, frequently turning aside with them into the woods and fields. On returning to the company they would boast and glory in their criminal intercourse with them.

After spending one night in our new dungeon we were called on by the Sheriff to come up into a more
comfortable apartment, and were treated with some degree of humanity. We were no longer troubled with guards, and even Luman and Phila behaved much better. We had been in our new situation something like a month, when we were visited by some friends from Illinois, from whom we learned the fate of our families and friends.

The wife of Mr. Phelps rode one hundred and sixty miles on horseback, accompanied by her brother, a young man named Clark. They arrived in Columbia and paid us a visit in prison about the 1st of July. My brother Orson also arrived on horseback about the same time. With these friends we had a good visit for some days—they being permitted to stay in the prison with us. They also brought a letter from my wife, by which I learned that she had made her escape from Far West to Quincy, Illinois, with her children and some of her goods, by the aid of Mr. David Rogers, of New York. During this journey they were much exposed to hardships and trouble, having to camp by the way, in company with other women and children who were in a like condition. On crossing a swollen stream, Mrs. Pratt had left the carriage to cross on a foot bridge, leaving the children to ride through it. She had just crossed over and turned to look back, to see whether the carriage came through in safety, when she discovered a little girl's bonnet floating down the stream, and, on examination, as the carriage rose the bank, her daughter, a girl of six years old, was missing from the carriage. The next moment she saw her floating down the swift current. She gave the alarm to Mr. Rogers, the driver, who instantly dropped the reins and sprang after her into the stream.

At this instant the horses, being high spirited and active, began to run, and would probably have dashed themselves and the carriage, goods, and the other child to pieces but for the timely interference of a large prong of a tree, which caught the carriage with such a strong hold that all was brought to a stand. In the meantime Mr. Rogers succeeded in rescuing the child and bringing her safe to shore.

She had, as she stated, pitched head foremost out of the carriage into the water. One of the wheels ran over her, and crushed her fast into the mud at the bottom of the stream; but as it rolled over she caught the spokes with her hands, and by this means the same weight that crushed her down brought her to the surface and saved her life. On examination the marks of the wheel were distinctly seen on both her thighs, which were seriously injured and nearly broken.

After a wearisome journey and various toils and dangers, they at length arrived at Quincy, Illinois, where Mrs. Pratt rented a small house, and by the sale of a few books, with the use of her two cows, which some of the brethren had brought from Missouri for her, she was making shift to live from day to day. She still expressed some faint hopes of seeing her husband again in a land of liberty, although at present there was little ground to hope, and she was sometimes nearly in despair.

Such was the news brought us by the arrival of our friends in the prison at Columbia on the 1st of July, 1839, after eight months of weary confinement. Previous to their arrival the Lord had shown me in a vision of the night the manner and means of escape. And, like Pharaoh's dream, the thing had been doubled—that is shown to me on two occasions in the same manner.

Mrs. Phelps had the same thing shown to her in a vision previous to her arrival; my brother, Orson Pratt, also came to us with a firm impression that we were about to be delivered. He even predicted that we should go to Illinois, when he should return there. As we sat pondering upon these things, and comparing our visions and manifestations of the spirit on this subject, my brother Orson opened the Book of Mormon, when the first sentence that caught his eye was the words of Ammon to King Lamoni: “Behold, my brother and my brethren are in prison, in the land of Middoni, and I go to deliver them!” This was indeed a similar instance to ours. Ammon, on that occasion had a brother in prison, and also brethren in the ministry, and did deliver them. Our case was exactly similar, not in Middoni, but in Missouri. And, what was still more strange, in a book of six hundred pages, this was the only sentence which would have fitted our case.
Parley P. Pratt’s Escape from Jail

He now began in earnest to make arrangements for our escape. If there had been no strong bolts and bars to overcome, still there was one serious obstacle which a miracle alone could immediately remove, which was this: I was then very sick and scarcely able to stand on my feet, or to go up and down from the upper room, where we were in the day time, to the dungeon where we slept.

It was the second of July, and our friends could only make an excuse for staying to spend the great national holiday with us (the 4th) before they must leave or excite the suspicions and ill will of the people; and, as that day had been a lucky one for our fathers and our nation, we had determined on that time as the proper one to bid farewell to bondage and gain our liberty. In short, we had determined to make that notable day a jubilee to us, or perish in the attempt. We, therefore, prayed earnestly to the Lord, that if he had determined to favor our plan, he would heal and strengthen me, and give us all courage to act well our part. Through the ministration of the ordinance appointed for healing, I was instantly healed, and from that moment began to feel as strong and fearless as a lion.

The Escape

Our plan was this: My brother, Orson Pratt, was to wait on the Judge and Attorney, and obtain various papers and arrangements for summoning witnesses from Illinois to attend our trial, which had just been adjourned for some months to come. He was also to procure an order from the Court to take affidavits in Illinois, in case the witnesses should object to come to the State from which they had been banished, in order to attend the trials.

These active preparations on our part to defend our case, together with engaging a lawyer or two, and paying a part of their fees beforehand, served as a sufficient blindfold to cover our real intentions. This done, and the papers all prepared in the hands of my brother, he and Mrs. Phelps and her brother were to stay with us until the 4th, and after celebrating the day with a dinner in the prison (which we obtained leave to do), he and the young Mr. Clark were to take leave with their horses, and also with the horse and saddle on which Mrs. Phelps had ridden, on pretence of taking him home with them to Illinois, while she stayed with her husband a few weeks in the prison; in the meantime engaging her board in the family of the keeper, who occupied part of the building in connection with the prison.

This measure, on the part of Mrs. Phelps, served the double purpose of lulling them into serenity, and also of furnishing a third horse; as there were three of us. These three horses were to be stationed in a thicket, or forest, about half a mile from the prison, and there the two friends were to await, in readiness for us to mount, should we be so fortunate as to reach the thicket alive.

Sundown, on the evening of the fourth, was the moment agreed upon, and if we did not then appear they were to give us up for lost, and make the best of their way to Illinois and inform our friends that we had gone to Paradise in attempting to come to them. The reason for appointing this hour was this: Our door would be opened at sundown to hand in our supper, and we must then make the attempt as our only chance; for it was customary to lock us up in the lower dungeon as soon as the shades of evening began to appear.

This plan all matured, and the arrangements completed with the court and the lawyers, the fourth of July dawned upon us with hope and expectation. While the town and nation were alive with the bustle of preparation for the celebration of the American Jubilee, and
while guns were firing and music sounding without, our prison presented a scene of scarcely less life and cheerfulness; for we were also preparing to do proper honors to the day. We had prevailed on the keeper to furnish us with a long pole, on which to suspend a flag, and also some red strips of cloth. We then tore a shirt in pieces, and took the body of it for the ground work of a flag, forming with the red stripes of cloth an eagle and the word “Liberty,” in large letters. This rude flag of red and white was suspended on the pole from the prison window, directly in front of the public square and court house, and composed one of the greatest attractions of the day. Hundreds of the people from the country, as well as villagers who were there at the celebration, would come up and stare at the flag, and reading the motto, would go swearing or laughing away, exclaiming, “Liberty! Liberty! What have the Mormons to do with celebrating liberty in a damned old prison?”

In the meantime active preparations were in progress for our public dinner: and with the contributions of our friends who were to partake with us, and a portion served from the public table of the citizens of the town, we had a plentiful supply. And, as we considered it was to be a day of release, we partook of our feast with much cheer, and with thankful as well as social feelings, which I think have been seldom if ever surpassed.

O ye sons of Columbia, at home and abroad! Think back to the fourth of July, 1839; call to mind your feast in honor of national freedom, and ask yourselves the question, whether in all your pomp and show of joy and social glee, you felt anything compared with our feelings, or the interest excited during that feast.

Eight months and four days we had been deprived of the sweets of that liberty which a whole nation was then engaged in celebrating; and we felt that:

Now’s the day, and now’s the hour,
To trample on a tyrant’s power;
To burst at once the prison’s gloom,
Or find a martyr’d hero’s tomb.

The dinner over, our brethren took a final leave of us and our prison, loaded with love, respects, compliments and messages to our families and friends in Illinois. All these, together with the goodbyes and farewells, were heard and witnessed by the keeper’s family, and served the purpose for which they were intended, viz: To lull them into security, and to remove all possible ground of suspicion as to our intentions.

After riding out of town a mile or two in the forest, on the road towards Illinois, they turned off into the thick leaved wilderness, and made their way in secret, as best they could, to the thicket agreed upon, within about half a mile of the prison; where, with horses saddled and bridle reins in hand, they awaited in anxious suspense the slow progress of the setting sun.

Source: http://mldb.byu.edu/ppprat31.htm