

CHAPTER III

All that day I lay in the dungeon cudgelling my brains for the reason of this new and inexplicable punishment. All I could conclude was that some stool had lied an infraction of the rules on me in order to curry favour with the guards.

Meanwhile Captain Jamie fretted his head off and prepared for the night, while Winwood passed the word along to the forty lifers to be ready for the break. And two hours after midnight every guard in the prison was under orders. This included the day-shift which should have been asleep. When two o'clock came, they rushed the cells occupied by the forty. The rush was simultaneous. The cells were opened at the same moment, and without exception the men named by Winwood were found out of their bunks, fully dressed, and crouching just inside their doors. Of course, this was verification absolute of all the fabric of lies that the poet-forgery had spun for Captain Jamie. The forty lifers were caught in red-handed readiness for the break. What if they did unite, afterward, in averring that the break had been planned by Winwood? The Prison Board of Directors believed, to a man, that the forty lied in an effort to save themselves. The Board of Pardons likewise believed, for, ere three months were up, Cecil Winwood, forger and poet, most despicable of men, was pardoned out.

Oh, well, the stir, or the pen, as they call it in convict argot, is a

training school for philosophy. No inmate can survive years of it without having had burst for him his fondest illusions and fairest metaphysical bubbles. Truth lives, we are taught; murder will out. Well, this is a demonstration that murder does not always come out. The Captain of the Yard, the late Warden Atherton, the Prison Board of Directors to a man--all believe, right now, in the existence of that dynamite that never existed save in the slippery-gear'd and all too-accelerated brain of the degenerate forger and poet, Cecil Winwood. And Cecil Winwood still lives, while I, of all men concerned, the utterest, absolutist, innocentest, go to the scaffold in a few short weeks.

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And now I must tell how entered the forty lifers upon my dungeon stillness. I was asleep when the outer door to the corridor of dungeons clanged open and aroused me. "Some poor devil," was my thought; and my next thought was that he was surely getting his, as I listened to the scuffling of feet, the dull impact of blows on flesh, the sudden cries of pain, the filth of curses, and the sounds of dragging bodies. For, you see, every man was man-handled all the length of the way.

Dungeon-door after dungeon-door clanged open, and body after body was thrust in, flung in, or dragged in. And continually more groups of guards arrived with more beaten convicts who still were being beaten, and more dungeon-doors were opened to receive the bleeding frames of men who

were guilty of yearning after freedom.

Yes, as I look back upon it, a man must be greatly a philosopher to survive the continual impact of such brutish experiences through the years and years. I am such a philosopher. I have endured eight years of their torment, and now, in the end, failing to get rid of me in all other ways, they have invoked the machinery of state to put a rope around my neck and shut off my breath by the weight of my body. Oh, I know how the experts give expert judgment that the fall through the trap breaks the victim's neck. And the victims, like Shakespeare's traveller, never return to testify to the contrary. But we who have lived in the stir know of the cases that are hushed in the prison crypts, where the victim's necks are not broken.

It is a funny thing, this hanging of a man. I have never seen a hanging, but I have been told by eye-witnesses the details of a dozen hangings so that I know what will happen to me. Standing on the trap, leg-manacled and arm-manacled, the knot against the neck, the black cap drawn, they will drop me down until the momentum of my descending weight is fetched up abruptly short by the tautening of the rope. Then the doctors will group around me, and one will relieve another in successive turns in standing on a stool, his arms passed around me to keep me from swinging like a pendulum, his ear pressed close to my chest, while he counts my fading heart-beats. Sometimes twenty minutes elapse after the trap is sprung ere the heart stops beating. Oh, trust me, they make most scientifically sure that a man is dead once they get him on a rope.

I still wander aside from my narrative to ask a question or two of society. I have a right so to wander and so to question, for in a little while they are going to take me out and do this thing to me. If the neck of the victim be broken by the alleged shrewd arrangement of knot and noose, and by the alleged shrewd calculation of the weight of the victim and the length of slack, then why do they manacle the arms of the victim? Society, as a whole, is unable to answer this question. But I know why; so does any amateur who ever engaged in a lynching bee and saw the victim throw up his hands, clutch the rope, and ease the throttle of the noose about his neck so that he might breathe.

Another question I will ask of the smug, cotton-wooled member of society, whose soul has never strayed to the red hells. Why do they put the black cap over the head and the face of the victim ere they drop him through the trap? Please remember that in a short while they will put that black cap over my head. So I have a right to ask. Do they, your hang-dogs, O smug citizen, do these your hang-dogs fear to gaze upon the facial horror of the horror they perpetrate for you and ours and at your behest?

Please remember that I am not asking this question in the twelve-hundredth year after Christ, nor in the time of Christ, nor in the twelve-hundredth year before Christ. I, who am to be hanged this year, the nineteen-hundred-and-thirteenth after Christ, ask these questions of you who are assumably Christ's followers, of you whose hang-dogs are going to take me out and hide my face under a black cloth because they

dare not look upon the horror they do to me while I yet live.

And now back to the situation in the dungeons. When the last guard departed and the outer door clanged shut, all the forty beaten, disappointed men began to talk and ask questions. But, almost immediately, roaring like a bull in order to be heard, Skysail Jack, a giant sailor of a lifer, ordered silence while a census could be taken. The dungeons were full, and dungeon by dungeon, in order of dungeons, shouted out its quota to the roll-call. Thus, every dungeon was accounted for as occupied by trusted convicts, so that there was no opportunity for a stool to be hidden away and listening.

Of me, only, were the convicts dubious, for I was the one man who had not been in the plot. They put me through a searching examination. I could but tell them how I had just emerged from dungeon and jacket in the morning, and without rhyme or reason, so far as I could discover, had been put back in the dungeon after being out only several hours. My record as an incorrigible was in my favour, and soon they began to talk.

As I lay there and listened, for the first time I learned of the break that had been a-hatching. "Who had squealed?" was their one quest, and throughout the night the quest was pursued. The quest for Cecil Winwood was vain, and the suspicion against him was general.

"There's only one thing, lads," Skysail Jack finally said. "It'll soon be morning, and then they'll take us out and give us bloody hell. We

were caught dead to rights with our clothes on. Winwood crossed us and squealed. They're going to get us out one by one and mess us up. There's forty of us. Any lyin's bound to be found out. So each lad, when they sweat him, just tells the truth, the whole truth, so help him God."

And there, in that dark hole of man's inhumanity, from dungeon cell to dungeon cell, their mouths against the gratings, the two-score lifers solemnly pledged themselves before God to tell the truth.

Little good did their truth-telling do them. At nine o'clock the guards, paid bravoos of the smug citizens who constitute the state, full of meat and sleep, were upon us. Not only had we had no breakfast, but we had had no water. And beaten men are prone to feverishness. I wonder, my reader, if you can glimpse or guess the faintest connotation of a man beaten--"beat up," we prisoners call it. But no, I shall not tell you. Let it suffice to know that these beaten, feverish men lay seven hours without water.

At nine the guards arrived. There were not many of them. There was no need for many, because they unlocked only one dungeon at a time. They were equipped with pick-handles--a handy tool for the "disciplining" of a helpless man. One dungeon at a time, and dungeon by dungeon, they messed and pulped the lifers. They were impartial. I received the same pulping as the rest. And this was merely the beginning, the preliminary to the examination each man was to undergo alone in the presence of the paid brutes of the state. It was the forecast to each man of what each man

might expect in inquisition hall.

I have been through most of the red hells of prison life, but, worst of all, far worse than what they intend to do with me in a short while, was the particular hell of the dungeons in the days that followed.

Long Bill Hodge, the hard-bitten mountaineer, was the first man interrogated. He came back two hours later--or, rather, they conveyed him back, and threw him on the stone of his dungeon floor. They then took away Luigi Polazzo, a San Francisco hoodlum, the first native generation of Italian parentage, who jeered and sneered at them and challenged them to wreak their worst upon him.

It was some time before Long Bill Hodge mastered his pain sufficiently to be coherent.

"What about this dynamite?" he demanded. "Who knows anything about dynamite?"

And of course nobody knew, although it had been the burden of the interrogation put to him.

Luigi Polazzo came back in a little less than two hours, and he came back a wreck that babbled in delirium and could give no answer to the questions showered upon him along the echoing corridor of dungeons by the men who were yet to get what he had got, and who desired greatly to know

what things had been done to him and what interrogations had been put to him.

Twice again in the next forty-eight hours Luigi was taken out and interrogated. After that, a gibbering imbecile, he went to live in Bughouse Alley. He has a strong constitution. His shoulders are broad, his nostrils wide, his chest is deep, his blood is pure; he will continue to gibber in Bughouse Alley long after I have swung off and escaped the torment of the penitentiaries of California.

Man after man was taken away, one at a time, and the wrecks of men were brought back, one by one, to rave and howl in the darkness. And as I lay there and listened to the moaning and the groaning, and all the idle chattering of pain-addled wits, somehow, vaguely reminiscent, it seemed to me that somewhere, some time, I had sat in a high place, callous and proud, and listened to a similar chorus of moaning and groaning.

Afterwards, as you shall learn, I identified this reminiscence and knew that the moaning and the groaning was of the sweep-slaves manacled to their benches, which I heard from above, on the poop, a soldier passenger on a galley of old Rome. That was when I sailed for Alexandria, a captain of men, on my way to Jerusalem . . . but that is a story I shall tell you later. In the meanwhile