

CHAPTER X

And above all things, next morning Warden Atherton came into my cell on murder intent. With him were Captain Jamie, Doctor Jackson, Pie-Face Jones, and Al Hutchins. Al Hutchins was serving a forty-years' sentence, and was in hopes of being pardoned out. For four years he had been head trusty of San Quentin. That this was a position of great power you will realize when I tell you that the graft alone of the head trusty was estimated at three thousand dollars a year. Wherefore Al Hutchins, in possession of ten or twelve thousand dollars and of the promise of a pardon, could be depended upon to do the Warden's bidding blind.

I have just said that Warden Atherton came into my cell intent on murder. His face showed it. His actions proved it.

"Examine him," he ordered Doctor Jackson.

That wretched apology of a creature stripped from me my dirt-encrusted shirt that I had worn since my entrance to solitary, and exposed my poor wasted body, the skin ridged like brown parchment over the ribs and sore-infested from the many bouts with the jacket. The examination was shamelessly perfunctory.

"Will he stand it?" the Warden demanded.

"Yes," Doctor Jackson answered.

"How's the heart?"

"Splendid."

"You think he'll stand ten days of it, Doc.?"

"Sure."

"I don't believe it," the Warden announced savagely. "But we'll try it just the same.--Lie down, Standing."

I obeyed, stretching myself face-downward on the flat-spread jacket. The Warden seemed to debate with himself for a moment.

"Roll over," he commanded.

I made several efforts, but was too weak to succeed, and could only sprawl and squirm in my helplessness.

"Putting it on," was Jackson's comment.

"Well, he won't have to put it on when I'm done with him," said the Warden. "Lend him a hand. I can't waste any more time on him."

So they rolled me over on my back, where I stared up into Warden Atherton's face.

"Standing," he said slowly, "I've given you all the rope I am going to. I am sick and tired of your stubbornness. My patience is exhausted. Doctor Jackson says you are in condition to stand ten days in the jacket. You can figure your chances. But I am going to give you your last chance now. Come across with the dynamite. The moment it is in my hands I'll take you out of here. You can bathe and shave and get clean clothes. I'll let you loaf for six months on hospital grub, and then I'll put you trusty in the library. You can't ask me to be fairer with you than that. Besides, you're not squealing on anybody. You are the only person in San Quentin who knows where the dynamite is. You won't hurt anybody's feelings by giving in, and you'll be all to the good from the moment you do give in. And if you don't--"

He paused and shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"Well, if you don't, you start in the ten days right now."

The prospect was terrifying. So weak was I that I was as certain as the Warden was that it meant death in the jacket. And then I remembered Morrell's trick. Now, if ever, was the need of it; and now, if ever, was the time to practise the faith of it. I smiled up in the face of Warden Atherton. And I put faith in that smile, and faith in the proposition I made to him.

"Warden," I said, "do you see the way I am smiling? Well, if, at the end of the ten days, when you unlace me, I smile up at you in the same way, will you give a sack of Bull Durham and a package of brown papers to Morrell and Oppenheimer?"

"Ain't they the crazy ginks, these college guys," Captain Jamie snorted.

Warden Atherton was a choleric man, and he took my request for insulting braggadocio.

"Just for that you get an extra cinching," he informed me.

"I made you a sporting proposition, Warden," I said quietly. "You can cinch me as tight as you please, but if I smile ten days from now will you give the Bull Durham to Morrell and Oppenheimer?"

"You are mighty sure of yourself," he retorted.

"That's why I made the proposition," I replied.

"Getting religion, eh?" he sneered.

"No," was my answer. "It merely happens that I possess more life than you can ever reach the end of. Make it a hundred days if you want, and I'll smile at you when it's over."

"I guess ten days will more than do you, Standing."

"That's your opinion," I said. "Have you got faith in it? If you have you won't even lose the price of the two five-cents sacks of tobacco. Anyway, what have you got to be afraid of?"

"For two cents I'd kick the face off of you right now," he snarled.

"Don't let me stop you." I was impudently suave. "Kick as hard as you please, and I'll still have enough face left with which to smile. In the meantime, while you are hesitating, suppose you accept my original proposition."

A man must be terribly weak and profoundly desperate to be able, under such circumstances, to beard the Warden in solitary. Or he may be both, and, in addition, he may have faith. I know now that I had the faith and so acted on it. I believed what Morrell had told me. I believed in the lordship of the mind over the body. I believed that not even a hundred days in the jacket could kill me.

Captain Jamie must have sensed this faith that informed me, for he said:

"I remember a Swede that went crazy twenty years ago. That was before your time, Warden. He'd killed a man in a quarrel over twenty-five cents and got life for it. He was a cook. He got religion. He said that a

golden chariot was coming to take him to heaven, and he sat down on top the red-hot range and sang hymns and hosannahs while he cooked. They dragged him off, but he croaked two days afterward in hospital. He was cooked to the bone. And to the end he swore he'd never felt the heat. Couldn't get a squeal out of him."

"We'll make Standing squeal," said the Warden.

"Since you are so sure of it, why don't you accept my proposition?" I challenged.

The Warden was so angry that it would have been ludicrous to me had I not been in so desperate plight. His face was convulsed. He clenched his hands, and, for a moment, it seemed that he was about to fall upon me and give me a beating. Then, with an effort, he controlled himself.

"All right, Standing," he snarled. "I'll go you. But you bet your sweet life you'll have to go some to smile ten days from now. Roll him over, boys, and cinch him till you hear his ribs crack. Hutchins, show him you know how to do it."

And they rolled me over and laced me as I had never been laced before. The head trusty certainly demonstrated his ability. I tried to steal what little space I could. Little it was, for I had long since shed my flesh, while my muscles were attenuated to mere strings. I had neither the strength nor bulk to steal more than a little, and the little I stole

I swear I managed by sheer expansion at the joints of the bones of my frame. And of this little I was robbed by Hutchins, who, in the old days before he was made head trusty, had learned all the tricks of the jacket from the inside of the jacket.

You see, Hutchins was a cur at heart, or a creature who had once been a man, but who had been broken on the wheel. He possessed ten or twelve thousand dollars, and his freedom was in sight if he obeyed orders.

Later, I learned that there was a girl who had remained true to him, and who was even then waiting for him. The woman factor explains many things of men.

If ever a man deliberately committed murder, Al Hutchins did that morning in solitary at the Warden's bidding. He robbed me of the little space I stole. And, having robbed me of that, my body was defenceless, and, with his foot in my back while he drew the lacing light, he constricted me as no man had ever before succeeded in doing. So severe was this constriction of my frail frame upon my vital organs that I felt, there and then, immediately, that death was upon me. And still the miracle of faith was mine. I did not believe that I was going to die. I knew--I say I knew--that I was not going to die. My head was swimming, and my heart was pounding from my toenails to the hair-roots in my scalp.

"That's pretty tight," Captain Jamie urged reluctantly.

"The hell it is," said Doctor Jackson. "I tell you nothing can hurt him.

He's a wooz. He ought to have been dead long ago."

Warden Atherton, after a hard struggle, managed to insert his forefinger between the lacing and my back. He brought his foot to bear upon me, with the weight of his body added to his foot, and pulled, but failed to get any fraction of an inch of slack.

"I take my hat off to you, Hutchins," he said. "You know your job. Now roll him over and let's look at him."

They rolled me over on my back. I stared up at them with bulging eyes. This I know: Had they laced me in such fashion the first time I went into the jacket, I would surely have died in the first ten minutes. But I was well trained. I had behind me the thousands of hours in the jacket, and, plus that, I had faith in what Morrell had told me.

"Now, laugh, damn you, laugh," said the Warden to me. "Start that smile you've been bragging about."

So, while my lungs panted for a little air, while my heart threatened to burst, while my mind reeled, nevertheless I was able to smile up into the Warden's face.