

CHAPTER XXII

My time grows very short. All the manuscript I have written is safely smuggled out of the prison. There is a man I can trust who will see that it is published. No longer am I in Murderers Row. I am writing these lines in the death cell, and the death-watch is set on me. Night and day is this death-watch on me, and its paradoxical function is to see that I do not die. I must be kept alive for the hanging, or else will the public be cheated, the law blackened, and a mark of demerit placed against the time-serving warden who runs this prison and one of whose duties is to see that his condemned ones are duly and properly hanged. Often I marvel at the strange way some men make their livings.

This shall be my last writing. To-morrow morning the hour is set. The governor has declined to pardon or reprieve, despite the fact that the Anti-Capital-Punishment League has raised quite a stir in California. The reporters are gathered like so many buzzards. I have seen them all. They are queer young fellows, most of them, and most queer is it that they will thus earn bread and butter, cocktails and tobacco, room-rent, and, if they are married, shoes and schoolbooks for their children, by witnessing the execution of Professor Darrell Standing, and by describing for the public how Professor Darrell Standing died at the end of a rope. Ah, well, they will be sicker than I at the end of the affair.

As I sit here and muse on it all, the footfalls of the death-watch going

up and down outside my cage, the man's suspicious eyes ever peering in on me, almost I weary of eternal recurrence. I have lived so many lives. I weary of the endless struggle and pain and catastrophe that come to those who sit in the high places, tread the shining ways, and wander among the stars.

Almost I hope, when next I reinhabit form, that it shall be that of a peaceful farmer. There is my dream-farm. I should like to engage just for one whole life in that. Oh, my dream-farm! My alfalfa meadows, my efficient Jersey cattle, my upland pastures, my brush-covered slopes melting into tilled fields, while ever higher up the slopes my angora goats eat away brush to tillage!

There is a basin there, a natural basin high up the slopes, with a generous watershed on three sides. I should like to throw a dam across the fourth side, which is surprisingly narrow. At a paltry price of labour I could impound twenty million gallons of water. For, see: one great drawback to farming in California is our long dry summer. This prevents the growing of cover crops, and the sensitive soil, naked, a mere surface dust-mulch, has its humus burned out of it by the sun. Now with that dam I could grow three crops a year, observing due rotation, and be able to turn under a wealth of green manure. . . .

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I have just endured a visit from the Warden. I say "endured" advisedly.

He is quite different from the Warden of San Quentin. He was very nervous, and perforce I had to entertain him. This is his first hanging. He told me so. And I, with a clumsy attempt at wit, did not reassure him when I explained that it was also my first hanging. He was unable to laugh. He has a girl in high school, and his boy is a freshman at Stanford. He has no income outside his salary, his wife is an invalid, and he is worried in that he has been rejected by the life insurance doctors as an undesirable risk. Really, the man told me almost all his troubles. Had I not diplomatically terminated the interview he would still be here telling me the remainder of them.

My last two years in San Quentin were very gloomy and depressing. Ed Morrell, by one of the wildest freaks of chance, was taken out of solitary and made head trusty of the whole prison. This was Al Hutchins' old job, and it carried a graft of three thousand dollars a year. To my misfortune, Jake Oppenheimer, who had rotted in solitary for so many years, turned sour on the world, on everything. For eight months he refused to talk even to me.

In prison, news will travel. Give it time and it will reach dungeon and solitary cell. It reached me, at last, that Cecil Winwood, the poet-forgery, the snitcher, the coward, and the stool, was returned for a fresh forgery. It will be remembered that it was this Cecil Winwood who concocted the fairy story that I had changed the plant of the non-existent dynamite and who was responsible for the five years I had then spent in solitary.

I decided to kill Cecil Winwood. You see, Morrell was gone, and Oppenheimer, until the outbreak that finished him, had remained in the silence. Solitary had grown monotonous for me. I had to do something. So I remembered back to the time when I was Adam Strang and patiently nursed revenge for forty years. What he had done I could do if once I locked my hands on Cecil Winwood's throat.

It cannot be expected of me to divulge how I came into possession of the four needles. They were small cambric needles. Emaciated as my body was, I had to saw four bars, each in two places, in order to make an aperture through which I could squirm. I did it. I used up one needle to each bar. This meant two cuts to a bar, and it took a month to a cut. Thus I should have been eight months in cutting my way out.

Unfortunately, I broke my last needle on the last bar, and I had to wait three months before I could get another needle. But I got it, and I got out.

I regret greatly that I did not get Cecil Winwood. I had calculated well on everything save one thing. The certain chance to find Winwood would be in the dining-room at dinner hour. So I waited until Pie-Face Jones, the sleepy guard, should be on shift at the noon hour. At that time I was the only inmate of solitary, so that Pie-Face Jones was quickly snoring. I removed my bars, squeezed out, stole past him along the ward, opened the door and was free . . . to a portion of the inside of the prison.

And here was the one thing I had not calculated on--myself. I had been five years in solitary. I was hideously weak. I weighed eighty-seven pounds. I was half blind. And I was immediately stricken with agoraphobia. I was affrighted by spaciousness. Five years in narrow walls had unfitted me for the enormous declivity of the stairway, for the vastitude of the prison yard.

The descent of that stairway I consider the most heroic exploit I ever accomplished. The yard was deserted. The blinding sun blazed down on it. Thrice I essayed to cross it. But my senses reeled and I shrank back to the wall for protection. Again, summoning all my courage, I attempted it. But my poor blear eyes, like a bat's, startled me at my shadow on the flagstones. I attempted to avoid my own shadow, tripped, fell over it, and like a drowning man struggling for shore crawled back on hands and knees to the wall.

I leaned against the wall and cried. It was the first time in many years that I had cried. I remember noting, even in my extremity, the warmth of the tears on my cheeks and the salt taste when they reached my lips. Then I had a chill, and for a time shook as with an ague. Abandoning the openness of the yard as too impossible a feat for one in my condition, still shaking with the chill, crouching close to the protecting wall, my hands touching it, I started to skirt the yard.

Then it was, somewhere along, that the guard Thurston espied me. I saw

him, distorted by my bleared eyes, a huge, well-fed monster, rushing upon me with incredible speed out of the remote distance. Possibly, at that moment, he was twenty feet away. He weighed one hundred and seventy pounds. The struggle between us can be easily imagined, but somewhere in that brief struggle it was claimed that I struck him on the nose with my fist to such purpose as to make that organ bleed.

At any rate, being a lifer, and the penalty in California for battery by a lifer being death, I was so found guilty by a jury which could not ignore the asseverations of the guard Thurston and the rest of the prison hang-dogs that testified, and I was so sentenced by a judge who could not ignore the law as spread plainly on the statute book.

I was well pummelled by Thurston, and all the way back up that prodigious stairway I was roundly kicked, punched, and cuffed by the horde of trusties and guards who got in one another's way in their zeal to assist him. Heavens, if his nose did bleed, the probability is that some of his own kind were guilty of causing it in the confusion of the scuffle. I shouldn't care if I were responsible for it myself, save that it is so pitiful a thing for which to hang a man. . . .

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I have just had a talk with the man on shift of my death-watch. A little less than a year ago, Jake Oppenheimer occupied this same death-cell on the road to the gallows which I will tread to-morrow. This man was one

of the death-watch on Jake. He is an old soldier. He chews tobacco constantly, and untidily, for his gray beard and moustache are stained yellow. He is a widower, with fourteen living children, all married, and is the grandfather of thirty-one living grandchildren, and the great-grandfather of four younglings, all girls. It was like pulling teeth to extract such information. He is a queer old codger, of a low order of intelligence. That is why, I fancy, he has lived so long and fathered so numerous a progeny. His mind must have crystallized thirty years ago. His ideas are none of them later than that vintage. He rarely says more than yes and no to me. It is not because he is surly. He has no ideas to utter. I don't know, when I live again, but what one incarnation such as his would be a nice vegetative existence in which to rest up ere I go star-roving again. . . .

But to go back. I must take a line in which to tell, after I was hustled and bustled, kicked and punched, up that terrible stairway by Thurston and the rest of the prison-dogs, of the infinite relief of my narrow cell when I found myself back in solitary. It was all so safe, so secure. I felt like a lost child returned home again. I loved those very walls that I had so hated for five years. All that kept the vastness of space, like a monster, from pouncing upon me were those good stout walls of mine, close to hand on every side. Agoraphobia is a terrible affliction. I have had little opportunity to experience it, but from that little I can only conclude that hanging is a far easier matter. . . .

I have just had a hearty laugh. The prison doctor, a likable chap, has

just been in to have a yarn with me, incidentally to proffer me his good offices in the matter of dope. Of course I declined his proposition to "shoot me" so full of morphine through the night that to-morrow I would not know, when I marched to the gallows, whether I was "coming or going."

But the laugh. It was just like Jake Oppenheimer. I can see the lean keenness of the man as he strung the reporters with his deliberate bull which they thought involuntary. It seems, his last morning, breakfast finished, incased in the shirt without a collar, that the reporters, assembled for his last word in his cell, asked him for his views on capital punishment.

--Who says we have more than the slightest veneer of civilization coated over our raw savagery when a group of living men can ask such a question of a man about to die and whom they are to see die?

But Jake was ever game. "Gentlemen," he said, "I hope to live to see the day when capital punishment is abolished."

I have lived many lives through the long ages. Man, the individual, has made no moral progress in the past ten thousand years. I affirm this absolutely. The difference between an unbroken colt and the patient draught-horse is purely a difference of training. Training is the only moral difference between the man of to-day and the man of ten thousand years ago. Under his thin skin of morality which he has had polished onto him, he is the same savage that he was ten thousand years ago.

Morality is a social fund, an accretion through the painful ages. The new-born child will become a savage unless it is trained, polished, by the abstract morality that has been so long accumulating.

"Thou shalt not kill"--piffle! They are going to kill me to-morrow morning. "Thou shalt not kill"--piffle! In the shipyards of all civilized countries they are laying to-day the keels of Dreadnoughts and of Superdreadnoughts. Dear friends, I who am about to die, salute you with--"Piffle!"

I ask you, what finer morality is preached to-day than was preached by Christ, by Buddha, by Socrates and Plato, by Confucius and whoever was the author of the "Mahabharata"? Good Lord, fifty thousand years ago, in our totem-families, our women were cleaner, our family and group relations more rigidly right.

I must say that the morality we practised in those old days was a finer morality than is practised to-day. Don't dismiss this thought hastily. Think of our child labour, of our police graft and our political corruption, of our food adulteration and of our slavery of the daughters of the poor. When I was a Son of the Mountain and a Son of the Bull, prostitution had no meaning. We were clean, I tell you. We did not dream such depths of depravity. Yea, so are all the lesser animals of to-day clean. It required man, with his imagination, aided by his mastery of matter, to invent the deadly sins. The lesser animals, the other animals, are incapable of sin.

I read hastily back through the many lives of many times and many places. I have never known cruelty more terrible, nor so terrible, as the cruelty of our prison system of to-day. I have told you what I have endured in the jacket and in solitary in the first decade of this twentieth century after Christ. In the old days we punished drastically and killed quickly. We did it because we so desired, because of whim, if you so please. But we were not hypocrites. We did not call upon press, and pulpit, and university to sanction us in our wilfulness of savagery. What we wanted to do we went and did, on our legs upstanding, and we faced all reproof and censure on our legs upstanding, and did not hide behind the skirts of classical economists and bourgeois philosophers, nor behind the skirts of subsidized preachers, professors, and editors.

Why, goodness me, a hundred years ago, fifty years ago, five years ago, in these United States, assault and battery was not a civil capital crime. But this year, the year of Our Lord 1913, in the State of California, they hanged Jake Oppenheimer for such an offence, and to-morrow, for the civil capital crime of punching a man on the nose, they are going to take me out and hang me. Query: Doesn't it require a long time for the ape and the tiger to die when such statutes are spread on the statute book of California in the nineteen-hundred-and-thirteenth year after Christ? Lord, Lord, they only crucified Christ. They have done far worse to Jake Oppenheimer and me. . . .

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As Ed Morrell once rapped to me with his knuckles: "The worst possible use you can put a man to is to hang him." No, I have little respect for capital punishment. Not only is it a dirty game, degrading to the hang-dogs who personally perpetrate it for a wage, but it is degrading to the commonwealth that tolerates it, votes for it, and pays the taxes for its maintenance. Capital punishment is so silly, so stupid, so horribly unscientific. "To be hanged by the neck until dead" is society's quaint phraseology . . .

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Morning is come--my last morning. I slept like a babe throughout the night. I slept so peacefully that once the death-watch got a fright. He thought I had suffocated myself in my blankets. The poor man's alarm was pitiful. His bread and butter was at stake. Had it truly been so, it would have meant a black mark against him, perhaps discharge and the outlook for an unemployed man is bitter just at present. They tell me that Europe began liquidating two years ago, and that now the United States has begun. That means either a business crisis or a quiet panic and that the armies of the unemployed will be large next winter, the bread-lines long. . . .

I have had my breakfast. It seemed a silly thing to do, but I ate it heartily. The Warden came with a quart of whiskey. I presented it to Murderers Row with my compliments. The Warden, poor man, is afraid, if I

be not drunk, that I shall make a mess of the function and cast reflection on his management . . .

They have put on me the shirt without a collar. . .

It seems I am a very important man this day. Quite a lot of people are suddenly interested in me. . . .

The doctor has just gone. He has taken my pulse. I asked him to. It is normal. . . .

I write these random thoughts, and, a sheet at a time, they start on their secret way out beyond the walls. . . .

I am the calmest man in the prison. I am like a child about to start on a journey. I am eager to be gone, curious for the new places I shall see. This fear of the lesser death is ridiculous to one who has gone into the dark so often and lived again. . . .

The Warden with a quart of champagne. I have dispatched it down Murderers Row. Queer, isn't it, that I am so considered this last day. It must be that these men who are to kill me are themselves afraid of death. To quote Jake Oppenheimer: I, who am about to die, must seem to them something God-awful. . . .

Ed Morrell has just sent word in to me. They tell me he has paced up and

down all night outside the prison wall. Being an ex-convict, they have red-taped him out of seeing me to say good-bye. Savages? I don't know. Possibly just children. I'll wager most of them will be afraid to be alone in the dark to-night after stretching my neck.

But Ed Morrell's message: "My hand is in yours, old pal. I know you'll swing off game." . . .

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The reporters have just left. I'll see them next, and last time, from the scaffold, ere the hangman hides my face in the black cap. They will be looking curiously sick. Queer young fellows. Some show that they have been drinking. Two or three look sick with foreknowledge of what they have to witness. It seems easier to be hanged than to look on. . . .

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My last lines. It seems I am delaying the procession. My cell is quite crowded with officials and dignitaries. They are all nervous. They want it over. Without a doubt, some of them have dinner engagements. I am really offending them by writing these few words. The priest has again preferred his request to be with me to the end. The poor man--why should I deny him that solace? I have consented, and he now appears quite cheerful. Such small things make some men happy! I could stop and laugh for a hearty five minutes, if they were not in such a hurry.

Here I close. I can only repeat myself. There is no death. Life is spirit, and spirit cannot die. Only the flesh dies and passes, ever a-crawl with the chemic ferment that informs it, ever plastic, ever crystallizing, only to melt into the flux and to crystallize into fresh and diverse forms that are ephemeral and that melt back into the flux. Spirit alone endures and continues to build upon itself through successive and endless incarnations as it works upward toward the light. What shall I be when I live again? I wonder. I wonder. . . .