

The Inmate of the Dungeon

By W. C. Morrow

After the Board of State Prison Directors, sitting in session at the prison, had heard and disposed of the complaints and petitions of a number of convicts, the warden announced that all who wished to appear had been heard. Thereupon a certain uneasy and apprehensive expression, which all along had sat upon the faces of the directors, became visibly deeper. The chairman—a nervous, energetic, abrupt, incisive man—glanced at a slip of paper in his hand, and said to the warden,— “Send a guard for convict No. 14,208.”

The warden started and became slightly pale. Somewhat confused, he haltingly replied, “Why, he has expressed no desire to appear before you.”

“Nevertheless, you will send for him at once,” responded the chairman.

The warden bowed stiffly and directed a guard to produce the convict. Then, turning to the chairman, he said,—

“I am ignorant of your purpose in summoning this man, but of course I have no objection. I desire, however, to make a statement concerning him before he appears.”

“When we shall have called for a statement from you,” coldly responded the chairman, “you may make one.”

The warden sank back into his seat. He was a tall, fine-looking man, well-bred and intelligent, and had a kindly face. Though ordinarily cool, courageous, and self-possessed, he was unable to conceal a strong emotion, which looked much like fear. A heavy silence fell upon the room, disturbed only by the official stenographer, who was sharpening his pencils. A stray beam of light from the westering sun slipped into the room between the edge of the window-shade and the sash, and fell across the chair reserved for the convict. The uneasy eyes of the warden finally fell upon this beam and there his glance rested. The chairman, without addressing any one particularly, remarked,—

“There are ways of learning what occurs in a prison without the assistance of either the warden or the convicts.”

Just then the guard appeared with the convict, who shambled in painfully and laboriously, as with a string he held up from the floor the heavy iron ball which was chained to his ankles. He was about forty-five years old. Undoubtedly he once had been a man of uncommon physical strength, for a powerful skeleton showed underneath the sallow skin which covered his emaciated frame. His sallowness was peculiar and ghastly. It was partly that of disease, and partly of something worse; and it was this something that accounted also for his shrunken muscles and manifest feebleness.

There had been no time to prepare him for presentation to the board. As a consequence, his unstockinged toes showed through his gaping shoes; the dingy suit of prison stripes which covered his gaunt frame was frayed and tattered; his hair had not been recently cut to the prison fashion, and, being rebellious, stood out upon his head like bristles; and his beard, which, like his hair, was heavily dashed with gray, had not been shaved for weeks. These incidents of his appearance combined with a very peculiar expression of his face to make an extraordinary picture. It is difficult to describe this almost unearthly expression. With a certain suppressed ferocity it combined an inflexibility of purpose that sat like an iron mask upon him. His eyes were hungry and eager; they were the living part of him, and they shone luminous from beneath

shaggy brows. His forehead was massive, his head of fine proportions, his jaw square and strong, and his thin, high nose showed traces of an ancestry that must have made a mark in some corner of the world at some time in history. He was prematurely old; this was seen in his gray hair and in the uncommonly deep wrinkles which lined his forehead and the corners of his eyes and of his mouth.

Upon stumbling weakly into the room, faint with the labor of walking and of carrying the iron ball, he looked around eagerly, like a bear driven to his haunches by the hounds. His glance passed so rapidly and unintelligently from one face to another that he could not have had time to form a conception of the persons present, until his swift eyes encountered the face of the warden. Instantly they flashed; he craned his neck forward; his lips opened and became blue; the wrinkles deepened about his mouth and eyes; his form grew rigid, and his breathing stopped. This sinister and terrible attitude—all the more so because he was wholly unconscious of it—was disturbed only when the chairman sharply commanded, “Take that seat.”

The convict started as though he had been struck, and turned his eyes upon the chairman. He drew a deep inspiration, which wheezed and rattled as it passed into his chest. An expression of excruciating pain swept over his face. He dropped the ball, which struck the floor with a loud sound, and his long, bony fingers tore at the striped shirt over his breast. A groan escaped him, and he would have sunk to the floor had not the guard caught him and held him upright. In a moment it was over, and then, collapsing with exhaustion, he sank into the chair. There he sat, conscious and intelligent, but slouching, disorganized, and indifferent.

The chairman turned sharply to the guard. “Why did you manacle this man,” he demanded, “when he is evidently so weak, and when none of the others were manacled?”

“Why, sir,” stammered the guard, “surely you know who this man is: he is the most dangerous and desperate—”

“We know all about that. Remove his manacles.”

The guard obeyed. The chairman turned to the convict, and in a kindly manner said, “Do you know who we are?”

The convict got himself together a little and looked steadily at the chairman. “No,” he replied, after a pause. His manner was direct, and his voice was deep, though hoarse.

“We are the State Prison Directors. We have heard of your case, and we want you to tell us the whole truth about it.”

The convict’s mind worked slowly, and it was some time before he could comprehend the explanation and request. When he had accomplished that task he said, very slowly, “I suppose you want me to make a complaint, sir.”

“Yes,—if you have any to make.”

The convict was getting himself in hand. He straightened up, and gazed at the chairman with a peculiar intensity. Then firmly and clearly he answered, “I’ve no complaint to make.”

The two men sat looking at each other in silence, and as they looked a bridge of human sympathy was slowly reared between them. The chairman rose, passed around an intervening table, went up to the convict, and laid a hand on his gaunt shoulder. There was a tenderness in his voice that few men had ever heard there.

“I know,” said he, “that you are a patient and uncomplaining man, or we should have heard from you long ago. In asking you to make a statement I am merely asking for your help to right a wrong, if a wrong has been done. Leave your own wishes entirely out of consideration, if you prefer. Assume, if you will, that it is not our intention or desire either to give you relief or to make your case harder for you. There are fifteen hundred human beings in this prison, and they

are under the absolute control of one man. If a serious wrong is practised upon one, it may be upon others. I ask you in the name of common humanity, and as one man of another, to put us in the way of working justice in this prison. If you have the instincts of a man within you, you will comply with my request. Speak out, therefore, like a man, and have no fear of anything.”

The convict was touched and stung. He looked up steadily into the chairman’s face, and firmly said, “There is nothing in this world that I fear.” Then he hung his head, and presently he raised it and added, “I will tell you all about it.”

At that moment he shifted his position so as to bring the beam of light perpendicularly across his face and chest, and it seemed to split him in twain. He saw it, and feasted his gaze upon it as it lay upon his breast. After a time he thus proceeded, speaking very slowly, and in a strangely monotonous voice:

“I was sent up for twenty years for killing a man. I hadn’t been a criminal: I killed him without thinking, for he had robbed me and wronged me. I came here thirteen years ago. I had trouble at first—it galled me to be a convict; but I got over that, because the warden that was here then understood me and was kind to me, and he made me one of the best men in the prison. I don’t say this to make you think I’m complaining about the present warden, or that he didn’t treat me kindly: I can take care of myself with him. I am not making any complaint. I ask no man’s favor, and I fear no man’s power.”

“That is all right. Proceed.”

“After the warden had made a good man out of me I worked faithfully, sir; I did everything they told me to do; I worked willingly and like a slave. It did me good to work, and I worked hard. I never violated any of the rules after I was broken in. And then the law was passed giving credits to the men for good conduct. My term was twenty years, but I did so well that my credits piled up, and after I had been here ten years I could begin to see my way out. There were only about three years left. And, sir, I worked faithfully to make those years good. I knew that if I did anything against the rules I should lose my credits and have to stay nearly ten years longer. I knew all about that, sir: I never forgot it. I wanted to be a free man again, and I planned to go away somewhere and make the fight all over,—to be a man in the world once more.”

“We know all about your record in the prison. Proceed.”

“Well, it was this way. You know they were doing some heavy work in the quarries and on the grades, and they wanted the strongest men in the prison. There weren’t very many: there never are very many strong men in a prison. And I was one of ’em that they put on the heavy work, and I did it faithfully. They used to pay the men for extra work,—not pay ’em money, but the value of the money in candles, tobacco, extra clothes, and things like that. I loved to work, and I loved to work extra, and so did some of the other men. On Saturdays the men who had done extra work would fall in and go up to the captain of the guard, and he would give to each man what was coming to him. He had it all down in a book, and when a man would come up and call for what was due him the captain would give it to him, whatever he wanted that the rules allowed.

“One Saturday I fell in with the others. A good many were ahead of me in the line, and when they got what they wanted they fell into a new line, waiting to be marched to the cells. When my turn in the line came I went up to the captain and said I would take mine in tobacco. He looked at me pretty sharply, and said, ‘How did you get back in that line?’ I told him I belonged there,—that I had come to get my extra. He looked at his book, and he said, ‘You’ve had your extra: you got tobacco.’ And he told me to fall into the new line. I told him I hadn’t received any tobacco; I said I hadn’t got my extra, and hadn’t been up before. He said, ‘Don’t spoil your record by trying to steal a little tobacco. Fall in.’ . . . It hurt me, sir. I hadn’t been up; I hadn’t got my extra; and I

wasn't a thief, and I never had been a thief, and no living man had a right to call me a thief. I said to him, straight, 'I won't fall in till I get my extra, and I'm not a thief, and no man can call me one, and no man can rob me of my just dues.' He turned pale, and said, 'Fall in, there.' I said, 'I won't fall in till I get my dues.'

"With that he raised his hand as a signal, and the two guards behind him covered me with their rifles, and a guard on the west wall, and one on the north wall, and one on the portico in front of the arsenal, all covered me with rifles. The captain turned to a trusty and told him to call the warden. The warden came out, and the captain told him I was trying to run double on my extra, and said I was impudent and insubordinate and refused to fall in. The warden said, 'Drop that and fall in.' I told him I wouldn't fall in. I said I hadn't run double, that I hadn't got my extra, and that I would stay there till I died before I would be robbed of it. He asked the captain if there wasn't some mistake, and the captain looked at his book and said there was no mistake; he said he remembered me when I came up and got the tobacco and he saw me fall into the new line, but he didn't see me get back in the old line. The warden didn't ask the other men if they saw me get my tobacco and slip back into the old line. He just ordered me to fall in. I told him I would die before I would do that. I said I wanted my just dues and no more, and I asked him to call on the other men in line to prove that I hadn't been up.

"He said, 'That's enough of this.' He sent all the other men to the cells, and left me standing there. Then he told two guards to take me to the cells. They came and took hold of me, and I threw them off as if they were babies. Then more guards came up, and one of them hit me over the head with a club, and I fell. And then, sir,"—here the convict's voice fell to a whisper,—“and then he told them to take me to the dungeon.”

The sharp, steady glitter of the convict's eyes failed, and he hung his head and looked despairingly at the floor.

"Go on," said the chairman.

"They took me to the dungeon, sir. Did you ever see the dungeon?"

"Perhaps; but you may tell us about it."

The cold, steady gleam returned to the convict's eyes, as he fixed them again upon the chairman.

"There are several little rooms in the dungeon. The one they put me in was about five by eight. It has steel walls and ceiling, and a granite floor. The only light that comes in passes through a slit in the door. The slit is an inch wide and five inches long. It doesn't give much light, because the door is thick. It's about four inches thick, and is made of oak and sheet-steel, bolted through. The slit runs this way,"—making a horizontal motion in the air,—“and it is four inches above my eyes when I stand on tiptoe. And I can't look out at the factory-wall forty feet away unless I hook my fingers in the slit and pull myself up.”

He stopped and regarded his hands, the peculiar appearance of which we all had observed. The ends of the fingers were uncommonly thick; they were red and swollen, and the knuckles were curiously marked with deep white scars.

"Well, sir, there wasn't anything at all in the dungeon, but they gave me a blanket, and they put me on bread and water. That's all they ever give you in the dungeon. They bring the bread and water once a day, and that is at night, because if they come in the daytime it lets in the light.

"The next night after they put me in—it was Sunday night—the warden came with the guard and asked me if I was all right. I said I was. He said, 'Will you behave yourself and go to work to-morrow?' I said, 'No, sir; I won't go to work till I get what is due me.' He shrugged his

shoulders, and said, 'Very well: maybe you'll change your mind after you have been in here a week.'

"They kept me there a week. The next Sunday night the warden came and said, 'Are you ready to go to work to-morrow?' and I said, 'No; I will not go to work till I get what is due me.' He called me hard names. I said it was a man's duty to demand his rights, and that a man who would stand to be treated like a dog was no man at all."

The chairman interrupted. "Did you not reflect," he asked, "that these officers would not have stooped to rob you?—that it was through some mistake they withheld your tobacco, and that in any event you had a choice of two things to lose,—one a plug of tobacco, and the other seven years of freedom?"

"But they angered me and hurt me, sir, by calling me a thief, and they threw me in the dungeon like a beast. . . . I was standing for my rights, and my rights were my manhood; and that is something a man can carry sound to the grave, whether he's bond or free, weak or powerful, rich or poor."

"Well, after you refused to go to work what did the warden do?"

The convict, although tremendous excitement must have surged and boiled within him, slowly, deliberately, and weakly came to his feet. He placed his right foot on the chair, and rested his right elbow on the raised knee. The index finger of his right hand, pointing to the chairman and moving slightly to lend emphasis to his narrative, was the only thing that modified the rigid immobility of his figure. Without a single change in the pitch or modulation of his voice, never hurrying, but speaking with the slow and dreary monotony with which he had begun, he nevertheless—partly by reason of these evidences of his incredible self-control—made a formidable picture as he proceeded:

"When I told him that, sir, he said he'd take me to the ladder and see if he couldn't make me change my mind. . . . Yes, sir; he said he'd take me to the ladder." (Here there was a long pause.) "And I a human being, with flesh on my bones and the heart of a man in my body. The other warden hadn't tried to break my spirit on the ladder. He did break it, though; he broke it clear to the bottom of the man inside of me; but he did it with a human word, and not with the dungeon and the ladder. I didn't believe the warden when he said he would take me to the ladder. I couldn't imagine myself alive and put through at the ladder, and I couldn't imagine any human being who could find the heart to put me through. If I had believed him I would have strangled him then and there, and got my body full of lead while doing it. No, sir; I could not believe it."

"And then he told me to come on. I went with him and the guards. He brought me to the ladder. I had never seen it before. It was a heavy wooden ladder, leaned against the wall, and the bottom was bolted to the floor and the top to the wall. A whip was on the floor." (Again there was a pause.) "The warden told me to strip, sir, and I stripped. . . . And still I didn't believe he would whip me. I thought he just wanted to scare me."

"Then he told me to face up to the ladder. I did so, and reached my arms up to the straps. They strapped my arms to the ladder, and stretched so hard that they pulled me up clear of the floor. Then they strapped my legs to the ladder. The warden then picked up the whip. He said to me, 'I'll give you one more chance: will you go to work to-morrow?' I said, 'No; I won't go to work till I get my dues.' 'Very well,' said he, 'you'll get your dues now.' And then he stepped back and raised the whip. I turned my head and looked at him, and I could see it in his eyes that he meant to strike. . . . And when I saw that, sir, I felt that something inside of me was about to burst."

The convict paused to gather up his strength for the crisis of his story, yet not in the least particular did he change his position, the slight movement of his pointing finger, the steady gleam of his eye, or the slow monotony of his speech. I had never witnessed any scene so dramatic as this, and yet all was absolutely simple and unintentional. I had been thrilled by the greatest actors, as with matchless skill they gave rein to their genius in tragic situations; but how inconceivably tawdry and cheap such pictures seemed in comparison with this! The claptrap of the music, the lights, the posing, the wry faces, the gasps, lunges, staggerings, rolling eyes,—how flimsy and colorless, how mocking and grotesque, they all appeared beside this simple, uncouth, but genuine expression of immeasurable agony!

The stenographer held his pencil poised above the paper, and wrote no more.

“And then the whip came down across my back. The something inside of me twisted hard and then broke wide open, and went pouring all through me like melted iron. It was a hard fight to keep my head clear, but I did it. And then I said to the warden this: ‘You’ve struck me with a whip, in cold blood. You’ve tied me up hand and foot, to whip me like a dog. Well, whip me, then, till you fill your belly with it. You are a coward. You are lower, and meaner, and cowardlier than the lowest and meanest dog that ever yelped when his master kicked him. You were born a coward. Cowards will lie and steal, and you are the same as a thief and liar. No hound would own you for a friend. Whip me hard and long, you coward. Whip me, I say. See how good a coward feels when he ties up a man and whips him like a dog. Whip me till the last breath quits my body; if you leave me alive I will kill you for this.’

“His face got white. He asked me if I meant that, and I said, ‘Yes; before God I do.’ Then he took the whip in both hands and came down with all his might.”

“That was nearly two years ago,” said the chairman. “You would not kill him now, would you?”

“Yes. I will kill him if I get a chance; and I feel it in me that the chance will come.”

“Well, proceed.”

“He kept on whipping me. He whipped me with all the strength of both hands. I could feel the broken skin curl up on my back, and when my head got too heavy to hold it straight it hung down, and I saw the blood on my legs and dripping off my toes into a pool of it on the floor. Something was straining and twisting inside of me again. My back didn’t hurt much; it was the thing twisting inside of me that hurt. I counted the lashes, and when I counted to twenty-eight the twisting got so hard that it choked me and blinded me; . . . and when I woke up I was in the dungeon again, and the doctor had my back all plastered up, and he was kneeling beside me, feeling my pulse.”

The prisoner had finished. He looked around vaguely, as though he wanted to go.

“And you have been in the dungeon ever since?”

“Yes, sir; but I don’t mind that.”

“How long?”

“Twenty-three months.”

“On bread and water?”

“Yes; but that was all I wanted.”

“Have you reflected that so long as you harbor a determination to kill the warden you may be kept in the dungeon? You can’t live much longer there, and if you die there you will never find the chance you want. If you say you will not kill the warden he may return you to the cells.”

“But that would be a lie, sir; I will get a chance to kill him if I go to the cells. I would rather die in the dungeon than be a liar and sneak. If you send me to the cells I will kill him. But I will kill him without that. I will kill him, sir. . . . And he knows it.”

Without concealment, but open, deliberate, and implacable, thus in the wrecked frame of a man, so close that we could have touched it, stood Murder,—not boastful, but relentless as death.

“Apart from weakness, is your health good?” asked the chairman.

“Oh, it’s good enough,” wearily answered the convict. “Sometimes the twisting comes on, but when I wake up after it I’m all right.”

The prison surgeon, under the chairman’s direction, put his ear to the convict’s chest, and then went over and whispered to the chairman.

“I thought so,” said that gentleman. “Now, take this man to the hospital. Put him to bed where the sun will shine on him, and give him the most nourishing food.”

The convict, giving no heed to this, shambled out with a guard and the surgeon.

The warden sat alone in the prison office with No. 14,208. That he at last should have been brought face to face, and alone, with the man whom he had determined to kill, perplexed the convict. He was not manacled; the door was locked, and the key lay on the table between the two men. Three weeks in the hospital had proved beneficial, but a deathly pallor was still in his face.

“The action of the directors three weeks ago,” said the warden, “made my resignation necessary. I have awaited the appointment of my successor, who is now in charge. I leave the prison to-day. In the mean time, I have something to tell you that will interest you. A few days ago a man who was discharged from the prison last year read what the papers have published recently about your case, and he has written to me confessing that it was he who got your tobacco from the captain of the guard. His name is Salter, and he looks very much like you. He had got his own extra, and when he came up again and called for yours the captain, thinking it was you, gave it to him. There was no intention on the captain’s part to rob you.”

The convict gasped and leaned forward eagerly.

“Until the receipt of this letter,” resumed the warden, “I had opposed the movement which had been started for your pardon; but when this letter came I recommended your pardon, and it has been granted. Besides, you have a serious heart trouble. So you are now discharged from the prison.”

The convict stared and leaned back speechless. His eyes shone with a strange, glassy expression, and his white teeth glistened ominously between his parted lips. Yet a certain painful softness tempered the iron in his face.

“The stage will leave for the station in four hours,” continued the warden. “You have made certain threats against my life.” The warden paused; then, in a voice that slightly wavered from emotion, he continued: “I shall not permit your intentions in that regard—for I care nothing about them—to prevent me from discharging a duty which, as from one man to another, I owe you. I have treated you with a cruelty the enormity of which I now comprehend. I thought I was right. My fatal mistake was in not understanding your nature. I misconstrued your conduct from the beginning, and in doing so I have laid upon my conscience a burden which will embitter the remaining years of my life. I would do anything in my power, if it were not too late, to atone for the wrong I have done you. If, before I sent you to the dungeon, I could have understood the wrong and foreseen its consequences, I would cheerfully have taken my own life rather than raised a hand against you. The lives of us both have been wrecked; but your suffering is in the

past,—mine is present, and will cease only with my life. For my life is a curse, and I prefer not to keep it.”

With that the warden, very pale, but with a clear purpose in his face, took a loaded revolver from a drawer and laid it before the convict.

“Now is your chance,” he said, quietly: “no one can hinder you.”

The convict gasped and shrank away from the weapon as from a viper.

“Not yet—not yet,” he whispered, in agony.

The two men sat and regarded each other without the movement of a muscle.

“Are you afraid to do it?” asked the warden.

A momentary light flashed in the convict’s eyes.

“No!” he gasped; “you know I am not. But I can’t—not yet,—not yet.”

The convict, whose ghastly pallor, glassy eyes, and gleaming teeth sat like a mask of death upon his face, staggered to his feet.

“You have done it at last! you have broken my spirit. A human word has done what the dungeon and the whip could not do. . . . It twists inside of me now. . . . I could be your slave for that human word.” Tears streamed from his eyes. “I can’t help crying. I’m only a baby, after all—and I thought I was a man.”

He reeled, and the warden caught him and seated him in the chair. He took the convict’s hand in his and felt a firm, true pressure there. The convict’s eyes rolled vacantly. A spasm of pain caused him to raise his free hand to his chest; his thin, gnarled fingers—made shapeless by long use in the slit of the dungeon-door—clutched automatically at his shirt. A faint, hard smile wrinkled his wan face, displaying the gleaming teeth more freely.

“That human word,” he whispered,— “if you had spoken it long ago,—if—but it’s all—it’s all right—now. I’ll go—I’ll go to work—to-morrow.”

There was a slightly firmer pressure of the hand that held the warden’s; then it relaxed. The fingers which clutched the shirt slipped away, and the hand dropped to his side. The weary head sank back and rested on the chair; the strange, hard smile still sat upon the marble face, and a dead man’s glassy eyes and gleaming teeth were upturned towards the ceiling.