

JAIL BREAK

TOM JOHNSON

ONE large room occupied the entire second story of the County Jail. Its brick walls were sheathed with upright four-by-four timbers, once whitewashed, now a dirty grey mottled with tobacco juice. One barred and glassless window looked out to the North, another to the South and two more faced the tobacco fields East of town. When it stormed, rude wooden shutters were propped in place to keep out the worst of the wind and rain. Two vermin-infested bunks in the corner, a pot-bellied coal stove and a couple of benches completed the furniture.

In the exact center of the room was set an iron cage measuring perhaps ten by twelve feet. Three boys, short-timers, and old Dad Harrison had the run of the room outside the cage. In the cage itself lived nine men, awaiting trial. We had no cots, no bunks. We slept spoon-fashion with only our overcoats between us and the cold, iron deck. At one end of the cage the white bowl of an open toilet reared its head. Beside it a two-foot length of pipe shot up from the floor to terminate in a faucet which supplied our water. Under it a battered and leaky wash-tub provided us variously with a place to wash our feeding pans, a washtub for our clothes, a bathtub for such sketchy bathing as we cared to indulge in and a means of flushing that unspeakable toilet.

There was nothing else in the cage. There was room for nothing else. We nine overflowed the place. We stumbled over one another's legs when we tried to walk; we ate, slept and swapped lies rubbing shoulders with each other. We slept largely in the day time. At night we lay awake fighting off the bugs and huge rats which overran the place. But their boldness and their numbers were amazing. It is impossible to say that rats, roaches and assorted vermin shared our quarters in the cage; rather we lived among them, barely tolerated interlopers in their own domain.

The three boys and Dad Harrison were our connection with the world outside our narrow cage. They were our hands, our ears, our eyes. Twice a day they passed in to us the greasy mess of beans and cabbage on which we fed. They kept up the fire in the stove that warmed us. They sat by the bars of the windows and relayed to us such news of the world as they could garner.

Slim and I had already weathered a month in the cage since that unlucky night the local sheriff spotted a northern license on our car, as we sped through Tracy on our way to a strike committee meeting. Orders had gone out to arrest on sight and hold for investigation all "foreigners" found in the Kentucky strike fields, and we were overtaken before we had left the town a mile behind. One look at Slim and the sheriff pulled his

gun and ordered us out of the car. They had been looking for him, the chief "outside agitator" in the mine strike zone, for weeks and now they had him. I was an unknown newcomer, but I was with Slim and that was enough. We were hauled to the county seat in triumph and promptly thrown in jail, charged with "sedition." Bond was set at \$5,000 and after a month of futile efforts to raise it there seemed little likelihood of our leaving the cage before our trial in the September term of court. There was nothing for it but to curse our luck and settle down to the weary life of our fellow canaries, as the cage birds were called.

Two of them were youngsters just turned nineteen. They were incredibly dirty and cheerful and easily adapted themselves to life in the cage. They had been caught red-handed in some petty thievery or other and looked forward with considerable equanimity to three years in the pen and a real education in more profitable forms of crime. Two were mountain liquor men, charged with the robbery of a farmer's wife during her husband's absence, and the casual rape of her daughter in the process. They protested their innocence to all who would listen, but the case looked strong against them and with rape carrying a possible life sentence they were badly scared and held frequent conferences with their lawyers at the bars of the cage. Various of their kinsmen visited them at intervals to report their progress, or lack of it, in combing the country for reliable alibi witnesses.

Bert Tolliver, long and lank, with an eternal quid of tobacco in his jaw, as the oldest inhabitant, had welcomed us to the cage. He was the victim of one of those age-old mountain feuds which smoulder for years and then suddenly, from the most trivial causes, break out in destroying flame. As Bert told the story, he was preparing for bed one night in his lonesome cabin up Skinned Head Hollow when he was shot, through the open window. The heavy 30-30 bullet took him in the shoulder and knocked him down. He had sense enough to reach up and put out the lamp on the table, then he rolled under the bed and lay there in the dark with his Smith and Wesson in his good hand. He did not have long to wait. The door opened and three men stepped in, lighting up the cabin with a flashlight. Bert opened fire and killed all three, taking another bullet in his thigh in the course of the fight. He bound up his wounds as best he could and lay there with his dead around him until daylight, when he hobbled down the branch to his nearest neighbor whom he ordered to town for a doctor and the sheriff.

It was court week when the killing took place and as Bert was still in the hospital he

was bound over to the next term. He had become something of a local celebrity as a result of this exploit and looked forward confidently to an acquittal on a plea of self defense. (I learned long afterward that he got it—and left the courtroom in a burst of applause from his admirers).

Bert was a quiet giant, gentle and friendly. It was difficult to imagine him in the role of a killer until one Saturday night when we got a taste of his temper. A couple of drunks who had been thrown into the space outside the cage got obstreperous and began heaving chunks of coal at us through the bars. We were unable to get at them and our efforts to



calm them down met with small success. Bert took no hand in the affair. During all the commotion he sat silently on his rolled-up blanket at the rear of the cage. When the drunks at last tired of the sport and the excitement subsided, he got up and started talking to them in friendly fashion. He finally managed to inveigle one of them to the side of the cage with the offer of a smoke. As the man reached for the cigarette Bert made a sudden lunge with both hands through the bars. He caught the unfortunate drunk by the throat and his great fingers tightened. The man clawed frantically at those fingers but it was no use; they were slowly squeezing out his life. His face turned red, then purple, his hands fell to his sides and his body sagged against the bars. It looked like another killing. Slim and I jumped for the old man and finally broke his grip. The drunk fell in a heap on the floor, unconscious. Bert was trembling, his face twitching and dead white.

"Why didn't you let me kill the bastard?" he mumbled again and again. It was half an hour before he had calmed down sufficiently to talk coherently.

They threw in the unconscious body of Roy Turner late one night during our first week in the cage. He was too drunk to move a finger. "Killed his cousin over to Mercer this afternoon," the jailor told us when they dragged him in. "Drunk as a coot then and he's been a-hittin' it ever since, I guess. They say he put three slugs in his cousin because the kid didn't like his singin' an' told him to shut up. He'll burn fer it, likely."

Roy must have shaken off his stupor during the night and remembered. We were aroused by the rattle of his boots against the bars. He hung from the top cross-bar of the cage, his belt around his neck and his body still twitching. We cut him down and brought him around. He said not a word but, "thanks fellers. You needn't be afeered of me tryin'

it again." He was silent after this. He had been a miner and we tried to cheer him up with news of the strike and to draw him into our discussions on the union and the working-class struggle, but it was of little use. He sat all day with a tattered Bible on his knees and a vacant stare in his eyes, or stood at the bars of the cage looking out to the mountains where he had been born, had lived and had killed his friend. He lost weight day by day and began to complain of pains in his chest. One morning he spat blood on the floor. The cage was slowly killing him.

No two or three deputies brought old Nate to the jail; he was escorted by a howling mob of most of the male inhabitants of the town, bent on a lynching. He was a Negro. He was guilty of the most heinous of all crimes in the eyes of the southern white: he had dared to marry a white woman.

We heard the savage blood yells of the mob long before it reached the jail, and Slim and I were more than a little worried. There had been much talk in the town of "takin' them Red-neck bastards outa jail with a rope around their necks." The strike lines were beginning to crack and the idea of a spectacular lynching of strike leaders as a means to turn the slow, bitter retreat of strikers starved out by hunger, into a headlong rout from which the union would recover slowly, if at all, is not unknown in American labor history. When first those terrible high-pitched yells, merging as they neared us into a wavering roar punctuated by the shrill shrieks of women and half-grown boys, beat upon our ears, our eyes sought each other and we stood silent, suspended from all other thought or feeling, our whole beings concentrated on that sound. "They're coming!" Slim whispered. And then, slowly, with a tight-lipped smile, "I thought they would."

There was little we could do and not much time to do that little in. We spoke swiftly in terse whispers to our cell mates. We knew they would be with us if it came to fighting; long hours of discussion on "the union" had seen to that. The boys outside handed us the poker from the stove and a two-by-four wrenched from the side of a bunk, and we sat down to wait, our muscles tense and our mouths dry and sticky.

Underneath that wave of sound from the mob you could hear a pin drop in the jail, but as the shouts grew clearer we knew they weren't meant for us—at least not this time. Moreover it was all noise. As Mark Twain said long ago, "The pitifulest thing out is a mob—but a mob of cowards without a *man* at the head of it is beneath pitifulness." This mob lacked a man.

Nate was a worn old man, his face and head bloody from the pistol butts of the deputies and the mob snapping at his heels, but he walked into that jail with his head up and no fear in his eyes. He had nerve. I know the let-down had me trembling when they led him in. The mob milled around in front of the jail awhile, yelling fresh threats, but finally its members dribbled away. The sheriff



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actually apologized for inflicting the company of a Negro on us proud representatives of the superior white race—even including the Reds.

"I'll be fair with yuh, boys," he said, "I hate like hell to shove this no-count nigger in on yuh, but I hain't got another place safe enough fer the black ape. If he gets under foot take and larrup him good. If there ever was a nigger needed takin' down, its him."

The deputies stood around cursing and threatening the old man until finally Slim broke out: "For Christ's sake leave the poor devil alone! Haven't you beaten him up bad enough as it is?"

"This pistol-whoppin' I give that nigger is nothin' to the one you'll git if yuh open that ugly trap of yours jes' once more, yuh Yankee nigger lover," one of the deputies replied, fingering the pearl-handled pistol at his belt.

Slim stood up with fire in his eyes, and I looked for trouble sure, but old Bert Tolliver, as usual, was equal to the emergency. "I don't keer how many niggers you pistol-whop, Shoots Robinson," he drawled, "but I do wish to hell you wouldn't use *my* pistol when yore a-doin' it. You'll bend hit outa plumb or knock the sight off, sure."

Robinson had Bert's pistol on his belt—supposedly held as part of the evidence against him—and the old man had recognized it. The other deputies laughed, Shoots grinned at Bert and the flare-up was over.

The days drifted slowly by. The deadly monotony of jail life lay on us like a blanket. We grew irritable and snapped at each other. I trained myself to sleep fourteen hours a day. Any diversion was welcome.

Old Bash Hinchley, the jailer, who slept on the landing just outside the door of the big room, contributed to our occasional amusement. He drank steadily, day after day. Never did I see him completely sober. Sometimes at night, when he was a bit tighter than usual, he would come in to spend a half-hour or so with us, leaning against the bars of the cage and yarning with the boys, some of whom he had known all their lives.

We almost lost Bash one time. One Sunday a couple of broken-down prostitutes from over the state line blew into town in an old Ford. They had a gallon jug of white mountain liquor with them and proceeded to tear up and down the one street of the village laughing and shrieking and in general doing their level best to escape for a time from the drab poverty of their lives. The sheriff finally ran them in and lodged them in the room below us in the first story of the jail.

That night after dark, Bash took one of them out and brought her up to his cubby-hole on the landing outside our door. They went to work on Bash's jug out there and if one were to judge by the noise, they must have made considerable inroads on it. At any rate Bash was so drunk he forgot to lock the girl up and the sheriff's wife found them both snoring in Bash's cot next morning when she came over from her house with our breakfast. She called her husband, and as Bash said afterward, "She raised bodacious hell itself fer a



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spell," demanding that he be immediately fired. The sheriff finally calmed her down, and Bash stayed. We decided he must have something on the sheriff and the latter was afraid to fire him.

The week the girls spent with us broke the monotony in more ways than one. One of the youngsters discovered a rusted-out rivet in the floor of the cage which, when removed, allowed us to listen to the rather highly spiced conversation of the girls in the room below. This was followed by the further discovery of a crack in the ceiling of the girls' room. Unfortunately the rivet hole in our floor and the crack in the ceiling of their room were a few inches out of line and so afforded no glimpse of what went on below. It remained for Bert to solve this last difficulty. He rigged up a hollow tube from a rolled-up newspaper which, when inserted through the rivet hole and then through the crack in the ceiling, gave a pretty fair view of the room below. Pinchle games now took on added interest; the boys gambled for the right to use the tube at night when the damsels below were preparing for bed.

The girls soon discovered our peeping and one of them threatened to tell the sheriff. The other, older and perhaps wiser, told her, "What the hell, honey, let 'em look. It don't do us no harm and the good Lord knows them poor boys have little enough fun." From then on our relations with the room below were of the friendliest.

The girls were released and life in the cage slipped back into its accustomed rut of boredom. Then suddenly all was changed. The wife of one of the liquor men slipped him a half dozen hack-saw blades concealed in a clean pair of jeans. Bash passed them in unsuspectingly enough.

We were told of it the next night. It was impossible to work without the other prisoners detecting it. It was necessary to bring all nine of us in the cage and the three boys and Dad Harrison, outside, into the attempted break. The liquor man evidently felt sure of everyone in the cage. Almost all were facing long terms and as for us "foreigners," we were fighting the coal operators and the "law"—that was enough. Moreover, we all realized that should one of our number turn stool pigeon, he would find it difficult to speak to the jailer without the knowledge of the rest, and before the cage door could be opened he would be beaten to a bloody pulp. None of us felt so sure of the three short-timers but it had to be chanced with them too. They declined to have anything to do with the break but willingly swore themselves to secrecy. Dad Harrison took to the idea at once. He had spent three years in the state coal mines and had no wish to repeat a hitch in that bloody hell. He was a simple and completely unmoral old man, charged with stealing a neighbor's rowboat and probably guilty.

Slim and I decided on an attitude of benevolent neutrality, but as events turned out, our instinctive feeling of sympathy for these warped and crippled victims of a cruel society

finally drew us into a more active role in the break.

The boys worked only in the daytime. At night even the most careful use of a well greased blade carried far. Bash Hinchley slept outside the door and although he usually went to bed drunk, we were taking no chances. Dad was put to work on one of the East windows. He would lean on the windowsill with his blade concealed in a rag and work like fury when the coast was clear. Indeed we had a hard job to keep him from working when the coast *wasn't* clear, so eager was he to be out. The rest took turn about on the cage bars. Roy devised a little tray from an old shoe box, cut so as to hook on the bar beneath the one being cut. The tray caught the steel filings which were then washed down the toilet. Close to the man working was set a tobacco tin filled with a paste made from powdered rust and soap and identical in color with the bars. When filled with this mixture it was impossible to distinguish the cut.

The work went slowly since it was possible to be at it only during Bash's absence from the jail. The short-timers cooperated to the extent of watching for his return from town and warning us when to cover up. We lived those days at high tension and had more than one close call. Bash and the sheriff suspected nothing, but the usual periodical inspections of the jail and particularly the cage, were made. One Sunday when the job was nearly finished, the sheriff came in for a look around. He passed over the outer windows at a glance but for the first time he unlocked the cage door and came inside. We joked with him to cover up our nervousness. We must have looked guilty as hell. He was too wise to look for cuts; he went about the cage methodically tapping each bar with his pistol butt and listening critically to its ring. As he approached the rear of the cage we held our breaths, but Slim started pacing up and down and, picking up Bert's blanket roll, tossed it casually out of his way. It landed in the rear corner where he intended it should. The

sheriff tapped most of the bars but he didn't bother to disturb the blanket to examine those behind it, close to the floor. The boys were working there. Of course they weren't foolish enough to cut any bar way through until all were ready, but even a partly cut bar might not ring true.

"Well fellers, that settles it!" said one of the liquor men when the sheriff was gone. "I come a-mighty near dyin' right here when that ole fox started fer the back of the cage. He don't suspect anything yet and I fer one don't aim to give him time to find out anything. We'll work like hell today—Bash has gone visitin' to his kinfolks on Crooked Creek and he won't be back 'til late evenin'—and to-night we'll jes' naturally blow!"

We set to work feverishly and by supper time the job was done—a square of bars in the cage and one in an outer window, each hanging by a shred of steel that could be severed by ten minutes of blade work. Bash came in looking mighty bleary and smelling worse; by ten o'clock he would be fit to sleep through an earthquake. Lights were out at nine and at twelve we went to work on the final preparations. One of the boys rapidly finished the last cut while the rest of us busied ourselves in the darkness ripping up blankets and coats to fashion a rope. At last all was ready. We shook hands all around. Someone quietly removed the square of sawed bars at the back of the cage, and with infinite care six men slipped through. Bert, Slim and I elected to remain behind. Bert felt sure of an acquittal and as for us—well, sedition wasn't a charge we were running out on.

We three lay there in the darkness and watched in strained silence as the shadows of our cell-mates drifted one by one across the little square of light between us and the wall, crouched, poised, for a moment in the window, their bodies outlined against the sky, and then, with a final wave of the hand, slid down the rope and out of sight.

"Damn their lucky hides, they're making it!" Slim whispered to me, "Do you hear boy, they're free!"



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